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By STEPHEN PAYNE

COURAGEOUS GAL

A Fascinating Novelet
By THELMA KNOLES

THE MONTANA KNIGHT

A Glamorous Novelet
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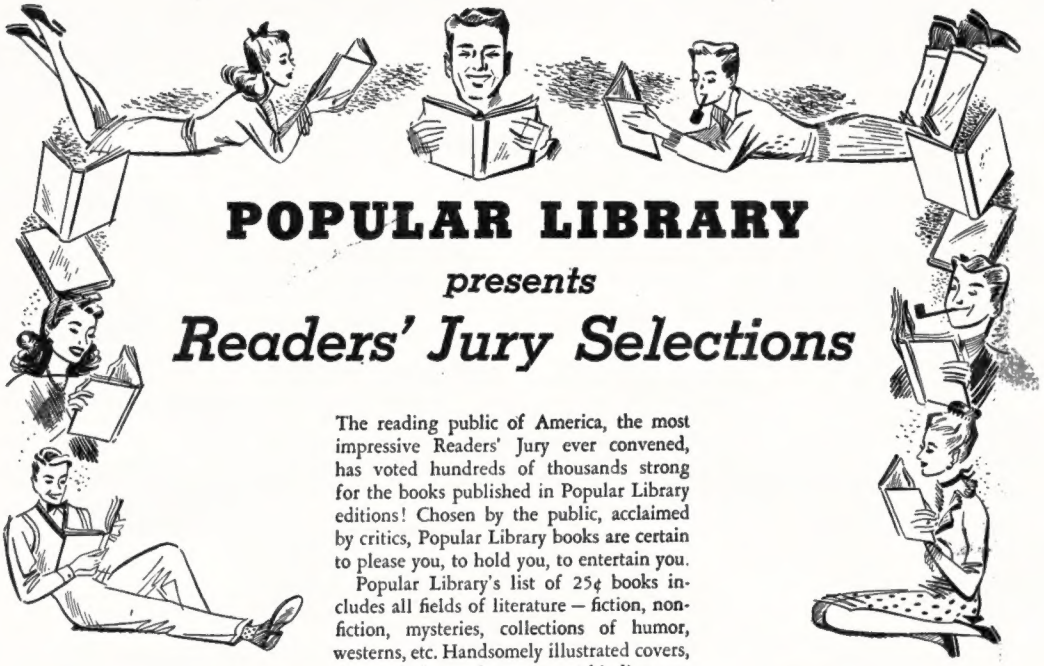

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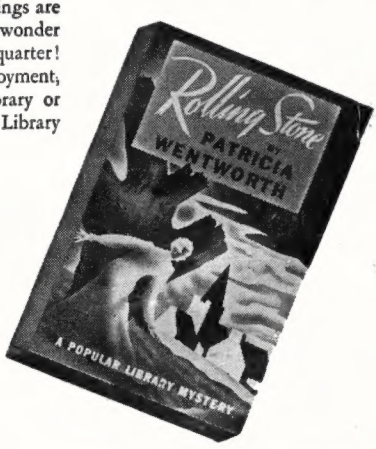

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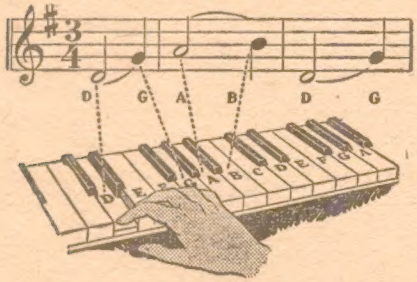

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THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XXXIV, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION August, 1946

Featured Complete Novelet

JACKIE OF THE OPEN RANGE

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Pretty Jacqueline Hearndon, outcast's daughter, finds the man of her dreams amid the turmoil, confusion and fury of a bitter, roaring range war between sheepmen and cattlemen! 9

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COURAGEOUS GAL ..... Thelma Knoles 54

Jinny Pennington proves that the true pioneer spirit can live in the heart of an Eastern girl when she faces plenty of real gunsmoke danger!

THE MONTANA KNIGHT ..... Shirley Manners 80

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A Department for Readers

Around the Branding Fire

Conducted by TEX BROWN

WELL, hola, everybody! Day like this sure makes you hone to kick up yore heels like a colt turned out to graze first day o' spring, don't it? Betcha! Makes you want'a climb into yore kak and go bustin' hell-for-leather crost country when the sun's shinin' bright and herds o' white-faces is swarmin' round, and green broncs is bein' rode high, wide and handsome by cowboys and cow-girls who savvies plenty *how*.

Yes suh, fellahs and gals o' the Brandin' Fire Club, the good old chuck wagon is bound to be standin' clost beside a nice little creek with cool agua to ease a fellow's throat o' trail dust, and the cook bangin' his old iron against a swingin' pot and bellerin' "Come an' git it!" That's sure sweet music, eh, folks? None prettier!

Sunburned Cattle

But listenin' to the talk around the circle, seems folks has got a few things on their minds to chew over with the rest o' us.

Here's a rannie what's run into sunburn amongst his small herd o' cattle. He's never seen or heard o' such before amongst range animals, and wants to know how come, and what's to be done about such a uncommon and lady-like ailment.

Sunburn is sort o' rare amongst cattle, sure, but most of us has seen it, and the treatment, as well as the cause, is known.

Mostly, it's caused by cattle feedin' on buckwheat or clover for too long a spell. Too much o' either o' these in the diet will cause the skin to become susceptible to the rays o' the sun.

The remedy is simple. Use any good sunburn lotion, addin' lamp black. Apply the mixture to the nose and eyelids, and any white spots on the animal. Makes a cow look like she's all dolled up for one o' them minstrel shows, but she won't give a durn, jest look at you soulful like outa her black-rimmed eyes, and moo long and gentle thanks.

Wolfers of the Range

Got a inquiry here from Minnie Wright o' the great old town o' San Francisco, California. Minnie lives in the city, but longs for the open country, and someday hopes to have a home on the range like the song says.

Minnie's heard of a old timer on the western ranges what was spoke of as a "Wolfer" and she'd like to know what sort of a fellow that is. Minnie says she means the term as used on the range, and not the kind a girl meets in the big town.

Yep, Minnie, there used to be great many "Wolfers" on the western ranges, and there's still some to be found. It's a right honorable trade, known by all, and in case o' some men, like old John Corbett, it's a scientific profession.

The man who gets rid o' wolves that prey on cattle is called a wolfer, or trapper.

These trappers, or wolfers, was among the most useful citizens o' the early Southwest, lemme tell you. The wolves o' the western ranges used to live bountifully on the flesh o' buffalo when they was plentiful, but the hunters come in and slaughtered the buffalo in such wholesale lots for their hides, wasn't any left for the wolves to prey on. Whereupon they started in on the cattle.

Ranchers, seein' their cattle disappear, hired men with savvy to get rid o' the wolves.

Now some o' the old time trappers was so durned good at their trade they become

(Continued on page 104)

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"You might at least have sung out, 'Hello, the camp'," Jackie rebuked the handsome young cattleman

Jackie of the Open Range

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Pretty Jacqueline Hearndon, outcast's daughter, finds the man of her dreams amid the turmoil, confusion and fury of a bitter, roaring range war between sheepmen and cattlemen!

CHAPTER I

Same Old Enmity

WHEN Jackie Hearndon had finished washing her hair she sat on the tongue of the sheep wagon that was her home. She was combing her hair, fluffing it out, when she heard a horse coming. Supposing that her father had returned from a scouting trip out across this new range, Jackie paid no attention. Mother had gone down along the small stream looking for mushrooms and wild strawberries; the Hearndon dogs and the herders, Jose and Juan, were with the sheep—yonder a half mile scattered out for the morning's grazing.

A small-framed girl with a birdlike quality about her and a rather sharp-angled piquant little face with large and warm brown eyes under arched black brows, Jackie was smiling as she day dreamed. For

it seemed as if Dad Hearndon, sheepman, had at last found a spot where he could graze his flock in peace.

Jackie and her dad and mother and the loyal herders were always being kicked around by cowmen who acted as if they owned the whole world and thoroughly despised sheepmen, especially tramp sheepmen. But here in the Porcupine Hills it seemed as if the Hearndons had found the ideal setup—open range for their flocks. They could thank Henry Cole for it, too.

Jackie, her right arm bare and with a huge sugar sack apron knotted loosely around her neck, brushed vigorously, and considered Henry Cole as any young lady of nineteen might consider her very serious lover. Then all at once she remembered hearing the horse stop at the camp and wondering why dad hadn't spoken, she turned—and fell off the wagon tongue as amazement and shock went through her. The apron fell off as she hit the ground and the hairbrush popped out of her hand.

What she had seen, all in a flash, was a superb sorrel horse and astride it, as if part of the animal, a well set up, blond young cowpuncher. His big Nutria hat was pushed back on his wavy, corn-colored hair and his eyes—they were as blue and as clear as the summer sky—were openly and appreciatively drinking in the picture of the lovely dark girl brushing her hair.

Blushing with keen embarrassment Jackie recovered quickly and picked up the apron and hairbrush. The man had been there three or four minutes, silently watching her and, darn him, he was silently laughing because she had taken a fall.

Anyone could see at a glance he was either a cowboy or a cowman. It made no difference, for they were all of the same rude, insolent, own-the-earth breed. Anger moved in Jackie.

"You might at least have sung out, 'Hello the camp,' " she said acidly.

SHE'D cut him all right, for his wide-lipped smile was instantly erased and his sunburned face turned gravely serious. His right hand tipped his hat and he spoke in a gently drawling voice.

"I apologize, Miss. But do you mind my sayin' I just couldn't help enjoyin' the prettiest picture I ever had the good luck to see?"

Flattery Jackie knew, even though her experience with suitors had been very limited. Yet some of her anger went away because she had not expected this answer and because—well there was something about the young fellow, even if he was a hated cowman—which had caught and now held her interest. She reseated herself on the wagon tongue.

"Oh, I don't really mind," she heard herself say. She gave a pull at the baggy sack apron. "Only I look a mess, and I didn't expect company. Who are you?"

His grin had come back.

"Lance Arthur, Miss. The Slash A outfit over on Little Bear Creek," pointing north across the rolling gray green hills. "And this," his hand made a waving motion, "happens to be my cattle range."

"There are no cattle on it," Jackie said quickly, defensively. "It's open range, Mr. Arthur."

"How long have you folks been here?" His gaze was on the scattered band of sheep. Their blatting was a continuous sound in the otherwise silent morning.

"We came only yesterday," said Jackie, removing the apron and smoothing her blouse and levis. She tipped up her chin to challenge him directly. "And we intend to stay."

His full attention came back to her.

"Weren't there cattle scattered all over these Porcupine Hills when you pitched camp?" he inquired.

"No."

Lance socked his left foot, which had been a-dangle, hard into the stirrup.

"Well I'll be darned! I'm alone on Slash A, and busy irrigating so I haven't ridden range for a few days. Now I find my herd has cut out of here. S'pose they drifted out onto the desert? They never did that before, but I reckon I'd better go see. What's your name, you pretty thing?"

"I'm Jacqueline Hearndon. That's my father coming yonder. He owns the sheep. He's not going to believe any fishy story about you having cattle that have mysteriously drifted away either."

"I surely wish we could be friends, Miss Hearndon." Some quizzical thought quirked the man's light brown eyebrows and they went up. "Jackie Hearndon? It'd be an odd soundin' name if you should become Jackie Arthur."

The girl tossed her head as she tried to think of a cutting reply and then her father,

Jackie's right hand caught Lance's fingers and she urged him onward through the lush grass away from the house

astride a heavy-bodied work horse, pulled up near the sheep wagon and stared truculently at the cowman.

Jackie could recall long ago days when this big, rawboned, bearded man had been a real father, kindly and understanding. Now, for many years, he'd been just the other way, a suspicious, belligerent, unfriendly man filled with bitterness and hatred.

Jackie, loyal to him, found excuses for his "cussedness." He'd been shoved around so much and for so long that he could not help resenting it. That Lance Arthur, obviously a hated cowman was there, instantly rubbed Radford Hearndon the wrong way, and his daughter sensed the clash of their wills. In her mind's eyes, she saw sparks flying as the men's eyes met and locked and duelled.

"What you doin' here, ranny?" Hearndon growled, exactly as Big, his best sheep dog, would growl deep in his throat when a coyote howled in the night.

By contrast, Lance's answer was mild.

"I figured, when I saw sheep on my range, I should get acquainted with the owner and ask 'how-come?' "

"Your range? Government land, ain't it?"

"Well, yes."

"All right. Government land, free range for any stockman of a mind to use. That settles that . . . Now, no cowman's welcome around my camp. You savvy?"

"But, Dad," Jackie cried, suddenly afraid she would never again see this cowboy. "Lance is—is different."

"Get in that wagon, Jackie! With your hair dangling down your shoulders you don't look dressed."

JACKIE bit hard on her trembling lower lip, and did not move. Did not move, when always before she had jumped to obey her overbearing father. Lance's eyes met hers for a moment and then went back to Hearndon.

"I'll be lookin' up my cattle," he said quietly. "And I think, Mr. Hearndon,—I'm darned sure we're going to lock horns. So long, Jackie."

Radford Hearndon, muttering in his beard, flung out of his saddle and busied himself chopping wood.

Jackie stepped up into her sheep wagon home to braid her hair. Presently she smiled at her reflection in the tiny mirror, thinking.

"He's nice," she whispered. "But I musn't think of him ever as a friend. Besides, there's Henry Cole. Henry's going to ask me to marry him any day now." All at once she became profoundly thoughtful.

It was last autumn when she had met Cole, tall, slender as a wagon tongue, with flaming red hair and a genial smile. The Hearndons had been camped near Agate where Dad had bought winter feed for his sheep, thereby annoying the cowmen but establishing his right to stay for the winter in that area.

Jackie had found no friends, either in the neighborhood or in town, so Henry Cole's visit to their camp came as a welcome surprise. For this pleasant red-headed fellow was not too old to be interesting and he was eager to be friends with Dad and Mother and Jackie. Particularly with Jackie. He'd given interest in the sheep business as a reason for has call. "I might take a notion to go into sheep myself."

Rad Hearndon had brindled at the suggestion he sell his flock.

"Cowmen are always advisin' me to sell 'em. I'm that barbed-wire ornery I wouldn't part with my woollies to please no doggoned cowman. Besides I make a livin' off these sheep. Some day they'll make some real dough, too."

"I'm a rancher, but not a cowman," Cole had said, placatingly. "So don't consider me an enemy."

It was three visits later—Jackie believed she was the attraction which brought Cole back to the sheep wagon camp—when the man mentioned desirable sheep range in the Porcupine Hills. "Open range. Yours, if you lay claim to it. You can take up a homestead on Porcupine Creek, too, and be sitting pretty in no time."

Cole had directed a tender look at Jackie.

"Best of all, we'd be neighbors," he had added. "I own a ranch on Little Bear Creek, north of Porcupine Hills; a sweet little spread. You'll love it, Jackie."

He had completely sold both Hearndon and Jackie on the idea, and he had given the girl a great rush before at length he said he must go back home. After that, glowing, romantic letters came regularly from Redhorse post office to Jackie Hearndon.

This spring, the lambing season over and the sheep sheared, the Hearndons had set out for Porcupine Hills. Jackie's letters advised Henry Cole of when they'd arrive, and only yesterday he had met the family and

had shown them where to make camp.

Yesterday Jackie had been thrilled, excited and happy over the prospect of settling down at last and building a real home where they had sheep range unclaimed by any cowman. Mother, too, had been happy.

But now the dream was already fading. No matter where the Hearndon's went Jackie's life was the same—strife, worry, fear. Fear for the safety of the sheep, even for her father's life.

She became aware that the sound of Dad Hearndon's ax had stopped and that someone was talking to him. Looking quickly out of the big wagon she saw Henry Cole, and with Lance in mind, she sized him up as if she had not seen him till now.

Cole dressed as a cowman who did not do rough work which would soil or muss his neat corduroy trousers, tan boots, colorful deep tan shirt and ornate calfskin vest. His face under the mat of red hair was a little bit too thin and sharp; sharp nose, sharp chin, sharp blue eyes.

UNTIL today Jackie had thought of him as tops. Now she wasn't so sure. A magnetic quality about Lance had stirred her emotions. During his brief visit something intangible, yet startling and moving, seemed to have developed between herself and the blond cowman.

Dad Hearndon had told Cole of Lance Arthur's call.

"As I get it, you're a neighbor of his on the same creek," he now was saying. "Has the snorty jasper got any call to holler about me being here, Henry?"

Unnoticed by the two men, Jackie listened closely to Cole's derisive reply.

"Sure. I know Lance. His Slash A is just above my place. Like all cowmen, he'll holler whether he's got a holler coming or not."

Jackie's throat tightened.

"Henry's hedging," she whispered. "I don't like it."

"Just as I told you," Henry Cole was going on, "this is open range. Nobody's dogies on it. Rad, don't you worry about getting in a fight with Lance. He's bogged to his ears in trouble with salty old Ike Watson, and Watson—"

"Who's this Ike Watson?" Hearndon asked.

"The big cowman of this neck of the woods. His home ranch, the I W, is on Deep Creek, north across the flats from my place on Little Bear Creek and Lance Arthur's Slash A. Ike Watson, a rough, tough old warhorse, will likely feed Lance a dose of lead and burn his buildings, quick as he finds out what Lance has done to him."

Hearndon stood solidly on his feet, holding the man on horseback with his steady, savage eyes.

"This is a cowman war atween them two cusses?"

"That's right. Where's Jackie?"

"Watson ain't learned yet what Lance is up to?"

"He'll catch on any minute, any hour now. Then he'll explode seven ways. Ike's an old-timer who's made his own law and still carries it in his holster . . . Oh, there you are, Jackie, honey! I'll catch up your calico pony and we'll go for a ride."

CHAPTER II
Treachery at Work

JACKIE HEARNDON enjoyed exploring this new country with Cole, and she thrilled to a close up view of the aloof and forbidding mountains which lifted abruptly against the western skyline. But when she tried to draw Cole out on the trouble brewing between Lance and Ike Watson, he refused to talk about it. Instead, he wanted to make love to her, and was quite upset because Jackie was in no mood for it.

When Jackie and Cole returned to the camp Jackie's mother was preparing dinner. She reported that Hearndon had gone to Redhorse, the town of this area. Later, when Henry Cole had, rather grumpily taken himself off, Mrs. Hearndon showed curiosity.

"What is it, Jackie? What's the matter?"

Jackie considered her mother's work hardened hands, her sunburned, tanned features, her bent shoulders and her gray hair. Mother, she often thought, had a hard life, an unsatisfactory life, yet this grand, patient woman had never complained. The girl drew a deep breath.

"This isn't the paradise or even the haven we'd hoped to find," Jackie said. "While riding with Henry, I saw tracks to show that cattle have been grazing in this area very recently."

Mother showed deep and immediate concern.

"But there aren't any cattle here now. Surely, Henry Cole would not have suggested we take possession of this range unless it was open. Don't fret, Jackie. With Henry for our friend we won't have any trouble."

The girl started to say, "We'll have a fight with Lance," and checked herself.

"You'll think it's silly," she said instead, "but I have the strangest feeling that I should warn Lance Arthur he's in danger."

"Lance Arthur!" exclaimed Mrs. Hearndon. "I saw him after he rode away from our camp. He stopped and spoke to me where I was hunting mushrooms down along the creek. A nice looking, blond young fellow."

She eyed her daughter shrewdly, giving Jackie the impression that she was looking straight into Jackie's secret mind.

"So you're interested in this stranger, Jackie? If only he wasn't a cowboy."

"Cowboy or not, he's in some grave danger he doesn't know about. Mother, you won't mind if I ride to his ranch? I know it's a crazy idea, when I shouldn't be the least bit concerned about any cowman."

For a moment the older woman was silent. Then she nodded gently, understandingly.

"All right. But be home before your father gets all worked up about your being gone.

Jackie hugged her mother. "We know how Dad is, don't we? This is another of our secrets."

Mrs. Hearndon nodded again, and Jackie, thankful that Rad Hearndon was nowhere in sight, was soon mounted on her little calico pony and on her way.

Five or six miles across rolling sage brush hills, spotted by aspen groves which were only now coming into full leaf, and Jackie passed through a set of bars in a stout fence and dropped down a steep bluff to the beautiful green valley of Little Bear Creek.

Lance Arthur's ranch she loved at first sight. There were heavy willows bordering the stream which flowed from west to east through the meadow, and in the shelter of these willows, on the south side of the stream, was an attractive set of log ranch buildings.

Apparently there was no one at home, and after momentary hesitation, for Jackie had never before visited a cowman, the girl dismounted and entered the log house. An ejaculation of pleasure escaped her, at the surprising neatness, cleanness and attractive furnishings. Accustomed to living in a sheep wagon or tent, this house fulfilled her idea of a real home.

Exploring the rooms, Jackie noticed both a window and a door in the north wall of the living room, looking toward the near by willows. She was tempted to lift a twenty-two rifle from its wall pegs and examine it, because she had handled firearms for as long as she could remember and had won four ribbons in shooting contests.

HOWEVER, without touching the rifle, she moved to the open door of the kitchen-dining room on the south side and took notice of three calves in a small, grassy enclosure and three milk cows grazing in the meadow with a half dozen good horses. The clang of a cowbell, the sweet lilting song of a meadow lark, and the raucous cry of a magpie broke the silence, and the smell of lush meadow grass was carried to her on a vagrant little wind.

It was all so peaceful and so restful that Jackie forgot that some menace threatened the ranch and its owner. A bright smile moved her lips and her eyes sparkled sympathetically.

She was thinking, He's sure to be hungry when he comes in. I'd just love to cook a meal in this ducky little house . . . Why not, after I stable my pony to get him away from the gnats and flies?

A wood fire was soon crackling in the cook stove and with a song on her lips, Jackie set to work, completely and thoroughly enjoying herself. Time passed swiftly, yet a meal was almost ready when Lance Arthur surprised her. She had not known he was home until all at once she looked up from rolling out biscuit dough and saw him standing motionless at the open door.

His clothing and his face were coated with dust, but his eyes were wide open with sheer, pleased astonishment.

"Hello there?" she said, with a flustered little laugh because all this was so unusual. "Chuck's ready. Wash your face and hands and sit up to the table, Lance."

He grinned, the same fetching, boyish grin she had noticed when she had first met him.

"Thanks, Miss Sprite. I—I could hardly

believe you were real. Ready in two shakes."

He tossed his hat on a peg, carried in a fresh bucket of water from the creek and washed while Jackie put the biscuits in the oven, dished up the steak, baked potatoes and gravy, and poured the coffee.

Lance pulled out a chair for Jackie, and took his own seat across from her.

"The sort of thing a lonely man dreams about, yet never expects to come true," he said. "Sprite, you can cook."

"My name's Jackie," said happy Jackie.

"Don't you like 'Sprite'?"

"Well, yes, Lance. Coming from you I do. Don't you have even one hired man?"

"I did," said Lance. "But he gave a flimsy excuse to quit me a week or so ago. Sort of odd. Now let's enjoy this swell meal. No, I'll get the biscuits."

They ate for a while in silence, yet whenever Jackie looked up she caught the man's eyes on her. Once he looked dreamily happy; again, his eyes were clouded and she imagined that perhaps he was thinking, as she was, that between them lay a chasm they could not bridge. That thought recalled her reason for being here. Oh, well, needn't mention it yet. She would enjoy this interlude to the fullest, snatching from it memories she would never, never forget.

She sprang lightly up and brought out the pie she had baked first of all in preparing the meal.

"Pie!" Lance exclaimed. "This is too good to be true."

Jackie's laugh was rippling music. "I do hope it's good. I used the only can of loganberries you had."

Suddenly the definite beat of hoofs sounded above the other noises from without, and a hard-ridden horse thudded to a halt near the kitchen door. Jackie glanced out and froze against the table, frightened and apprehensive. Terribly apprehensive. She had not warned Lance and now—

The man astride that horse had rough, tough cowman stamped all over his raw-boned, aggressive six-foot frame. His face was rough hewn, set in harsh lines while coarse iron gray hair and beetling eyebrows gave him almost a sinister look. His deep bass voice reached into the room.

"Lance!"

Lance came to his feet and stepped outside. "Why, hello, Ike. Light off and come in and have some coffee and a chunk of pie."

Ike? thought Jackie in terror. Ike Watson! I've never seen even my dad look madder than this cowman now looks. He's right on the fight!

IT WAS dim inside the kitchen-dining room after the full sunlight and apparently the man had not seen Jackie.

"To blazes with your grub!" Watson rapped out.

"Ike, are you drunk?" Lance asked in a strange sharp voice. "If you ain't, what's bitin' on you?"

"As if you didn't know, Lance Arthur. You shove all your Slash A dogies—four hundred odd head—onto my I W range, and ask what's bitin' on me!"

"My dogies on your range, Ike?" said Lance as if he couldn't believe he had heard correctly. "That's ridic—Wait! I couldn't find 'em on my Porcupine Hills range, nor out on Sage Desert either. I've been ridin' all day, worried sick, couldn't imagine what the heck had become of my herd. Now you say you've seen 'em?"

"I say they're on my range, big as life," Ike snapped. "What are you tryin' to put over on me?"

"Cool off," Lance advised. He had gotten a firm hold on his temper. "Let's be reasonable. I didn't know my cattle were on your range."

The cowman gritted his teeth.

"I got proof you put 'em there. One of my men, Shorty Doan, saw you and two other fellers he didn't recognize doin' the work at night. Who were the buzzards helpin' you, Lance?"

Jackie saw Lance's eyebrows draw down, his forehead groove with thought.

"Buzzards helping me? Ike, just when does Shorty claim to have seen all this?"

"Night before last. 'Bout three o'clock. Shorty was at the crossin' on Little Bear Creek, four miles above your place, Lance."

"What was he doing there at three in the morning?"

"Shorty was comin' home to the I W from deliverin' a couple of horses to Ridge Calloway's ranch down in the Smokies. He should have got home in the evenin', but he'd played around in town 'till dark before he hit out for my ranch."

"Yeah?" said Lance openly sceptical. "What's the rest of his story?"

"It went like this," Ike retorted. "At the crossing on Little Bear he heard bawlin' and

heard cattle beatin' through the willows and splashing 'cross the creek. And then Shorty seen you, Lance Arthur, plain as could be, working the drag end of the herd along."

"He did—in a pig's eye!" Lance gave a snort.

"Shorty knew this deal was awful snakish like, so he turned into the brush and kept hid till the dogies was all clear of the willows. Then he moved out and saw two other men besides you, Lance."

"Can he identify either of them?"

"Nope."

Lance snapped his fingers disgustedly. "Ike, the contemptible little whelp's lying when he says he recognized me. I wasn't there."

"Your cattle are on I W range," Ike Watson countered. "It's only fair to tell you that I wouldn't believe Shorty when he reported what he'd seen. I told him, 'You're talkin' through your hat, or else you were drunk and seein' things.' Then I rode to Redhorse on business, got home late last night and this mornin' I reckoned maybe I should see if there was anything to what Shorty'd said. Hang it! the dogies were there!"

"Steady!" said Lance. "Don't get all lathered up again, Ike. I'm sayin' there's something badly haywire. But I mentioned pie and coffee. Come in and we'll make medicine."

"Huh?" growled the cowman, and his lower jaw dropped as he caught sight of Jackie. "Who's that gal?"

CHAPTER III
Roaring Guns

DURING all of this stormy interlude, Jackie had been as still and quiet as if she were a piece of the furniture. Yet her thoughts had been whirling. Instinctively believing his side of the argument, she was for Lance Arthur all the way. Moving quickly to the open door, she looked at Watson.

"Introduce me, Lance," she said.

His quick glance at her was warm with approval.

"Miss Jacqueline Hearndon; Ike Watson of the I W outfit."

Jackie smiled at the rugged cowman. "How do you do, Mr. Watson? Won't you have a piece of pie with us?" Surely this should help to put the irate man in a more reasonable humor.

But, after a short savage stare, Watson grew angrier.

"Hearndon?" he repeated. "Hearndon! That's the name of that da—darned sheepman. I learned in Redhorse yesterday 'bout him movin' in a big flock of woollies and pitchin' camp on Porcupine Creek. Are you Hearndon's daughter?"

Jackie was suddenly both confused and angry. Moreover she saw that Lance was feeling exactly the same way. It was he who answered.

"What difference does it make, Ike? You might be civil at least. Jackie, being neighborly, got supper for me."

Jackie found the penetrating and hostile gaze of Ike Watson's black eyes most uncomfortable.

"So Hearndon's daughter got supper for you, Lance? Right chummy—right chummy—with the sheep outfit, you are. Reckon that sort of explains it."

"Explains what?" Lance demanded, his neck and cheeks and even his forehead as red as live coals. Jackie, however, knew that she had turned white.

"Explains your low-down, dirty trick—shovin' your dogies onto my grass," rumbled Watson. "I couldn't savvy why you'd do it, Lance. But now I'm onto the tie-up between you and the sheep outfit, I savvy plenty! You whooped your cattle out of Porcupine Hills so the blasted sheepman could have that range."

Bewildered, confused and thoroughly angry, Jackie wheeled and ran into the farther room where she had left her hat and gloves. Instead of helping Lance as she had hoped, the mere fact of her being under his roof had complicated his already touchy problem tenfold. She must go away at once.

She was reaching for her hat when she caught sight of two figures through the north window. She paused and gave them her full attention.

Two roughly dressed men, each with a gun in hand, were moving stealthily from the willows toward the west side of the dwelling. The window was raised at the bottom, which enabled Jackie to hear their low voices.

"Sure we ain't to drop both of 'em, Hip Shot?" one of the men asked.

"I've told you, bonehead," the other man retorted. "We're to shoot Watson and make our escape."

Jackie, tense and frightened, remembered the twenty-two repeating rifle she had noticed in this room. In a second she had the light weapon in her hands and in another she had thrown a shell into the barrel. She had not time to make sure the magazine was fully loaded, nor did she believe she had time to warn Ike Watson of his great danger.

She darted through the outside door of the room and along the wall to the northwest corner of the house. Here she stopped, for a cautious look. At the southwest corner crouched the two men, peering around the corner to see Ike and Lance, their voices raised in fierce argument, on the south side of the house.

"Now," muttered the man whom Jackie had heard addressed as Hip Shot, raising his six-shooter head high and starting to swing it down for a shot.

Jackie had to step out where they could see her. The stock of the twenty-two snuggled against her shoulder. The crack of its exploding cartridge mingled with the deep roar of a forty-five shot.

She saw Hip Shot's six shooter go spinning from his suddenly numbed hand and she saw the utterly thunderstruck expression that flashed across the gun hawk's wicked face as he jumped to his feet and faced her.

His slower-witted partner also jumped to his feet and whirled, his gun ready.

"Drop it, or I'll kill you," Jackie called.

HE PROMPTLY let go of his gun, frightened, rattled and uncertain. Not so Hip Shot.

"A gal!" the gun hawk clipped. "Shucks, she won't shoot us, Toothy. Come on!"

He grabbed the other man's arm and they raced for the willows.

Wrong! Jackie thought. I will shoot!

She aimed at Hip Shot's right leg, pulled trigger. No report. Except for one shell, the magazine had been empty.

By this time, both Ike Watson and Lance had stormed around the house, just in time to see two men dive in the willows like prairie dogs into their holes, and vanish. Watson pulled in his horse. His stare at Jackie Hearndon was ludicrous.

"Wh—what happened? Some snake sent a bullet through my hat. He nigh got me."

Lance rushed to the girl. "You all right, Jackie?"

"Of course I'm all right," she flashed back impatiently. "Get your horse and your gun and catch that pair. Hurry! Right now they're disarmed."

"Disarmed?" Lance echoed, seeing the six-shooters, one near the corner of the house, the other a few yards distant. "Some shooting for a girl." He sprinted to his horse, grazing not far away with bridle reins atrail.

Watson was still staring at Jackie.

"I heard them say they intended to kill you," Jackie cried. "I don't know why—But one is called Hip Shot, the other Toothy, if that's any help."

Lance arrived on his horse. The rifle which had been scabbarded on his saddle was in his hands.

"Come on, Ike," he yelled.

As the two cowmen disappeared in the willows, Jackie, shaky-kneed now that the crisis was past, picked up Toothy's Colt and

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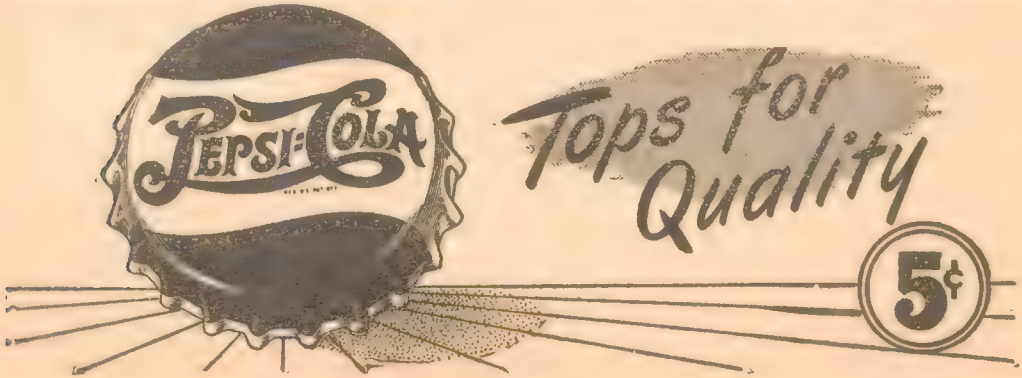


slipped it into her belt. The other she broke open, extracted the unfired cartridges and dropped them into the pocket of her riding skirt. If further trouble developed, she was now well-armed.

Without lighting a lamp she set about clearing the table and washing the dishes, hoping the work would clarify her confused thoughts. Her father would be uneasy because she had not come home. He'd pry out of Mother where she had gone, and then he'd throw a fit.

Jackie shrugged her small, yet sturdy, shoulders. Let him have a fit. She was glad she had come to the Slash A. She liked Lance Arthur so very much, and—she shuddered, visualizing what might have happened if she had not been here. What was behind all this very odd range war?

Quite soon hoof beats, coming up the valley from the direction of Henry Cole's ranch, caught her attention. Standing well back from a window, she waited tensely, and expelled her breath with great relief when she recognized the man who rode into the door yard—Henry Cole.

"Yo-ho, Lance!" he called.

Jackie observed that Cole was glancing sharply all about him, as if expecting to see something—what?—in the vicinity. She stepped outside.

"Hello, Henry. Am I glad to see you!"

"Uh?" he stammered as if the wind had been knocked out of him. "That you, Jackie? What are you doing here on this cowman's ranch?" He stared at her. "Am I seeing things?"

"I'm real all right, Henry."

With visible effort, Cole pulled himself together.

"Jackie I don't understand it. Where's Lance? I thought I heard a shot up this way."

"Perhaps you did, Henry. Get off and come inside. I want to talk to you. I must talk to you. Now."

From the willows, where Jackie believed Watson and Lance were still at work on a man hunt, she heard no noise. But a horse was beating across the meadow from the south, the direction of Hearndon's camp.

Cole stepped down and stood holding his horse.

"Where's Lance? That shot? What happened?"

"That's part of what we must talk about, Henry. You see, Lance and I were here when Ike Watson came and—" Briefly, she sketched the situation and saw Cole listening as if spellbound. Winding up, she said:

"You see Lance and Watson are combing the brush now for those would-be killers. Henry, you have something to explain to me."

"Jackie, what can you mean? I have something to explain? This unfortunate range war situation is news to me."

JACKIE gave him a glance of surprise.

"Oh, no, it isn't!" the girl contradicted him. Of course, she still liked Henry Cole and wanted to believe in him. Or did she, now that she had met Lance and had, in a way, fought for him?

"In the first place," she went on, "you told us that Porcupine Hills was open range, not being used, and if Daddy put his sheep on it he'd establish his right to it. Was it true?"

"Oh, that?" The man snapped his fingers. "Well, Jackie, darling Jackie, because I loved you and wanted your folks for neighbors, I did stretch a point in the hope that I could win you for my wife."

Cole made as if to throw his arm around her. But Jackie backed away.

"Please answer my question," she said sharply.

"All right, all right," His tone was testy. "Lance Arthur was making use of Porcupine Hills for his summer cattle range, but I had advance information that Lance intended to horn in on I W range."

The sound of a horse sloshing through irrigation water in the meadow was definitely nearer.

"Do hurry, Henry," Jackie said.

"Lance's idea was to go into sheep himself and graze them in Porcupine Hills. Well, I realized that if Hearndon beat him to it, he could not put that over. I also realized that, just about the time you Hearndons would reach here, he'd make his move to get in on the I W range."

"Yes?" asked the girl, deeply concerned and hurt. Hurt because she could not believe this explanation, and Henry Cole was showing himself in a new, most unfavorable light.

"Yes, what?" he said and she flared up.

"I heard you talking to Dad this morning," she said. "How did you know then there was terrible trouble coming up between Watson and Lance?"

"Very simple, dear girl. Lance rounded up his cattle and put them on I W range the

night before last. I saw some of Watson's cowboys only yesterday and learned they knew what had happened. These cowboys were marking time, waiting to see what action their boss, Ike Watson, would take."

Tense and apprehensive, Jackie said nothing.

Cole again tried to put his arms around her.

"I could have told you all this this morning, my darling, only I didn't want to trouble you with things of no concern to you. How does it happen you're here?"

The oncoming horse plowed to a halt, breathing fast and hard. Radford Hearndon's familiar figure was in the saddle and Hearndon's voice lashed out.

"Jackie, what the devil you doin' on a cowman's ranch?"

"Get hold of yourself, Dad," Jackie said steadily.

"Find yore hoss and come with me. Now. Hello, Henry. Reckon I'm glad you're with her, not Lance Arthur."

Seething with frustration and hot rebellion and anger Jackie fled to the stable and brought out her calico pony. She did not want to leave Slash A until this range war problem was completely cleared up and settled. But to cross her father in one of his black moods was like baiting a cornered grizzly. She'd pretend she was going willingly and . . .

Her mind was busy, very busy as she swung to saddle and rode back to the two men.

Apparently Cole had taken time to outline the trouble between Lance and Watson, for now Hearndon was scowling.

"No skin off my nose if a couple of cowmen get in a roarin' fight," he snapped. "Nothin' could please me more. Just so I can hold that Porcupine Hills range, that's all I care about."

"You can surely hold it, Rad," Cole said. "Jackie, I'd ride home with you, but I do want to see Lance. Good night, my dear."

"'Night," murmured Jackie, lining her pony alongside her father's heavy mount. In silence they crossed the meadow, climbed the hill and came to the Slash A borderline fence.

Hearndon dismounted to let down the bars. Jackie picked up the bridle reins of his horse to lead it through the opening and the instant both horses cleared the bars, she deliberately and quickly tugged the bridle from the horse she was leading, and belted the animal on the rump.

Her ruse worked. As the horse leaped to a clumsy lope, Heardon let out a yell.

"Get 'im! Bring Pete back!"

Jackie flogged her own not-so-fast, pony after the runaway until sure she was out of Hearndon's sight. Then she wheeled and, circling far around the angry man plodding through the sage, returned to the Slash A ranch.

CHAPTER IV
Jackie Scents a Plot

UNDER cover of night, Jackie struck the willows three hundred odd yards west of the Slash A buildings and, after tying her pony, she stole quickly down through the heavy brush to a point quite near Lance's house.

She feared Henry Cole would be gone. But with a great surge of relief, Jackie heard voices and moved to the house to eavesdrop shamelessly.

Watson was not present but Lance and Henry Cole were in the unlighted kitchen.

"So her dad came and took her home?" Lance was saying. "Mad as a hornet, eh?"

"Furious," said Cole. "You and Watson didn't even sight the men you were looking for?"

"In that brush? Heck, no! Henry, I'm in the darndest mess. It's like waking out of a gosh-awful nightmare and finding it's real. You've said Jackie told you something about it?"

"Yes. And I was amazed. Shocked."

"Had you ever seen her before?" Lance put in. "She's wonderful. Not only is she pretty and capable, she's gritty and efficient as well. Why, Henry, she took my twenty-two rifle, shot the Colt out of one tough hombre's hand, stampeded the pair of them and never turned a hair. I figure Ike Watson and I both owe our lives to her."

"Could be," said Cole in what Jackie realized was a very odd tone. "I saw her this morning, so I wasn't a complete stranger when I rode up here. But I'm interested in your difficulty, Lance. Naturally you can bank on me to help you."

"I was sure of that, Henry," Lance re-

turned as if finding comfort in his neighbor's interest. "It boils down to this: Some snakes in the grass put my dogies on I W range. Watson accused me, saying Shorty Doan saw me doing it. You know old Ike's stubborn, one track mind. Nothing short of proof I'm in the clear will convince him he's wrong. Henry, you know all our neighbors. What possible motive could any one of them have for putting over such a devilish trick?"

"Motive?" Henry Cole said, and evidently pondered the question before he went on. "Well, what have you figured out?"

Lance's boots clattered on the floor as he circled impatiently before replying.

"I don't like to say this when I've taken such a shine to Miss Jackie Hearndon," he said, his voice hoarse with strain, "but the only man who really had a motive is Rad Heardon. He's got a couple of good herders. Could be that the night before last he roped them in to help him, rounded up Porcupine Hills and shoved my cattle onto I W range.

"After he'd done this, Hearndon could swear the range wasn't being used when he came, and he had every right to make use of it."

Having already considered her father as a suspect in this case, Jackie was not shocked by what she had just heard. The strange thing, she thought, was that both Ike Watson and Lance had not instantly suspected the sheepman.

"Heck, I'm overlooking a point," Lance resumed. "It's probable Hearndon hired the two gun throwers, and maybe they, not the Mexican herders, helped round up my cattle."

"Could be," agreed Cole. "But can you prove it?"

Lance's reply was astonishing to Jackie and, she believed, to Henry Cole.

"I'm not sure I want to prove it. I'm thinking of Jackie!"

Jackie could not control the wild leap of her pulses. Strange and yet thrilling that this blond young cowman, who had met her only this morning, should now be so considerate of her that he'd bend backwards to avoid trouble with her father. She realized as always that her loyalty belonged to Dad Hearndon, yet her heart went out to Lance. She was—oh, so glad she had slipped away from her father and had returned to the Slash A, so she might help Lance out of his great difficulty and clear up the grim puzzle.

"Yes?" Cole spoke the word as a question.

"You're not much help, Henry," Lance snapped.

"I'm doing a lot of hard thinking," Cole said significantly. "What was back of the gunmen's attempt? Just what did they have in mind?"

LANCE ARTHUR'S voice was thoughtful when he answered.

"That play came so fast Ike and I didn't take time to question Jackie. But she did say she heard them assert they intended to kill Ike Watson. That don't make sense to me with Ike fighting me tooth and nail. I suspect they intended to get me, too. With me dead, my outfit would be tied up in a legal tangle and nobody'd fight Hearndon for my Porcupine Hills range."

"Lance, didn't you and Ike get together after that attempt on his life?" Cole asked.

Jackie, having believed that the two cowmen, hunting a common enemy, would surely bury the hatchet, was all ears. She heard Lance draw a deep breath and expel it with a gusty sound.

"That barbed-wire old warhorse jumps to the craziest conclusions," he said. "Still maybe they're not so goofy when you look at it from his angle. He believed Shorty Doan's big lie and Jackie passed on to him the names of the two gunmen—Hip Shot and Toothy. Toothy is what the dumb-bell who'd been working for me is called. Ike finally remembered that and jumped to another of his astounding conclusions. He and I churned around in the willows, accomplishing nothing, till dark stopped us. Then Ike said, 'Toothy is still workin' for you, Lance, and you hired the other gunhawk.' He also declared they'd helped me with the cattle and that I'd ordered them to drygulch him.

"To me that's the craziest thing yet," Lance continued. "But I couldn't talk Ike out of the notion. He said his punchers would shove my dogies back where they belonged, first thing tomorrow morning, and that if I crossed him up again, he'd sure kill me. He rode toward the I W, mad as a trapped wolf."

"And just as unreasonable," said Cole, a triumphant ring in his voice. "Well Lance," he went on, "it seems to me the only way you can possibly avoid more trouble with Ike Watson and a red hot range war with Rad Hearndon is to sell out and get clear of the whole mess."

"Me sell out?" sputtered Lance.

"Sure. Hearndon's already established a firm hold on what was your range, and you simply can't run cattle on land being grazed by sheep. Go to law about it and you know you haven't a leg to stand on. Government land is free range for sheep or cattle. Raise hob with Hearndon on your own hook outside the law and you'll land in the penitentiary. Am I right?"

"Yep," agreed Lance in a flat, dead voice.

"And you can't crowd in on I W range, for Watson's a law unto himself and you can't buck him, Lance."

"I'll admit I can't buck him," the harried Lance Arthur answered. "I don't want to sell, nor to fight Jackie's father."

"Well," said Cole offhandedly, "just to help out a neighbor and a good friend I might make you an offer on the Slash A."

Jackie clenched her hands till the knuckles were white. "At last he's come out with it!" she whispered fiercely.

"Watson's motive for all this dirty work is clear."

"You'd buy the Slash A?" Lance asked in amazement.

"The land, not the stock. I'm content to raise and sell hay, so I'd not get into trouble with anybody, you see. I'd suggest you ship your cattle. But I can give you a fair price for the ranch, neighbor."

"Supposin' I sleep on it, Henry?"

"Do that. I've got to rush home now, Lance. Be seeing you first thing tomorrow."

When Henry Cole had mounted his horse which had been standing ground-hitched nearby, and had ridden down the valley toward his ranch, Jackie came in through the back door.

"Lance," she called in low tones. "It's Jackie. Don't speak above a whisper."

"Jackie!" he whispered, and was at the door between the rooms in a twinkling, gazing down at her face upturned in the dimness. "Jackie, what are you doing here? Your father will be worried."

"Let's forget him for now."

"I wish I could forget him! You must know he's—"

JACKIE put a firm hand over Lance's lips. "We must trail Henry Cole without being seen, and we must hurry. Got your gun? That's fine. We'll go afoot. Horses would make too much noise."

He seized her hand and pressed it.

"Jackie, you do strange things to me. You're the most delightful disturbance that has ever come into my life. I love you. I love you in spite of its darned hopelessness. But of all the wild and unbelievable things that have hit me tonight, this idea of trailing Cole is the wildest."

"You must believe me, it isn't," the girl whispered. "Again, come on. We'll see what we may see and then—"

Her right hand caught his. She urged him out of his house and onward down the valley with its lush freshness of growing grass and its mannerly little breezes stealing across the darkness under the stars.

And in spite of trouble and strife, romance walked with these two.

When at length they came near Henry Cole's buildings, Jackie drew her companion close to the willows along Little Bear Creek and, screened by the heavy shadows, they moved slowly, cautiously onward.

A peculiar whistle broke the stillness. After a moment an echo of the same whistle answered it. Jackie's heart began to jump with excitement. Her hand tightened in Lance's.

"I was right!" she breathed. "Henry's signaled and the signal's been answered."

CHAPTER V
Unmasked

CLOSER and closer to Cole's house they moved. There was no light in it, but the man's horse stood in the yard. Abruptly Jackie crouched low against the ground, pulling Lance down with her, for Henry Cole was greeting three men who had just come up out of the willows.

All four were mere shapes in the darkness, but Jackie, after prolonged scrutiny, put her lips against Lance's ear.

"They're the two gunfighters I saw, and a stubby cowboy wearing a big black hat."

Lance did more than merely put his lips close to her ear to reply. He gently kissed that ear. "The black hat's Shorty Doan," he whispered. "He's one of this gang. So's my late hired man, Toothy Bunting."

A gruff voice which Jackie recognized as that of "Hip Shot" spoke.

"Wal, rip into us, Boss. 'Course you've

seen now how we bungled the job at Slash A. All I can say is that the first me and Toothy knowed there was a gal on the place was when she shot the shootin' iron right out of my fist. You heard 'bout that, Henry? I'm plumb humilerated. Pour it on me."

"You bungled all right," Cole snapped. "But, the way things have worked out, it don't make any difference." His voice was exultant.

There was a momentary silence before the man known as "Toothy" made any comment.

"There's a heap I don't savvy, Mr. Cole. Like what for did you start all this?"

"All right, Toothy," Cole answered, in evident good humor. "I wanted to go into sheep, but didn't dare so long as Lance Arthur was my neighbor. Somehow I had to get rid of him.

"The scheme took shape when I met Hearndon and persuaded him to come here. Perhaps I'd make a goat of the sheepman, perhaps not, depending on how the play came out. The next step was to make Ike Watson believe Lance was guilty of putting his cattle on I W range.

"That trick has panned out better than I'd hoped for. But if it hadn't worked—that is if Watson and Lance, instead of fighting each other, had figured that Hearndon was the wolf in the thicket, they'd have joined forces to smash him, never suspecting me."

Jackie flinched. Then anger flamed through her.

To think that she had once considered becoming the bride of this vile schemer! Thank heaven she had unmasked him before it was too late. Thank heaven that Lance was with her now, getting his eyes opened, pressing her hand to assure her of his love and protection.

Toothy had another question. "What was downin' Watson goin' to get you, boss? I still no savvy that play."

"Why, Toothy, I'd think even you could see through it. We'd got Lance and Watson fighting, so if Watson had been shot on the Slash A, Lance would have realized that the I W men would believe he killed Ike in spite of anything he could say to the contrary. If that play had come off, I was going to advise Lance to sell to me and skip out before the I W punchers caught him and cracked his neck. Cute, huh, Toothy?"

"Shore," growled Hip Shot. "But you said it didn't make no difference now if that play didn't work out. How come?"

Henry Cole chuckled wickedly. "This'll give you a laugh, Hip Shot. Watson, the darned fool, believes Lance hired you fellows to get him. Now, Lance, with two fights on his hands, is going to sell to me and high-tail. I'll close a deal with him tomorrow. After that's fixed you're to drygulch him, Hip Shot, so nobody'll ever know who did it."

"You want him shot 'cause the sheepman's gal just might go for him?" Hip Shot asked.

"Hip Shot, you're nobody's fool. But do get your dumb sidekick, Toothy, clear out of this country. And you Shorty Doan, stick to your story and keep it straight. That's all for now, men."

Jackie had long been aware how Lance was squirming mentally and physically, eager to interrupt this conference which she had wished to hear to its end.

ONCE the cowman had murmured. "Thank God, your father's not tangled up in this grisly plot. Crawl back to the willows, Jackie," he now whispered. "Get behind something, out of danger. I'm going to wade into 'em!"

"I can throw a gun. I'm siding you."

"I know, honey. But what if you got hurt?"

She thrilled to the deep feeling and concern in his low voice.

She thought, how's he think it would be for me if they kill him? She knew now she loved him; how very much she loved him. But she had not answered nor had she begun to slip away when all at once Hip Shot took alarm.

"I hear somethin'!" he cried. "Over there!"

He wheeled to face the spot where Jackie and Lance lay, and Jackie's hope that the gun hawk had not provided himself with another weapon died as he whipped out a Colt.

"Up where I can see you—areachin', or I'll cut loose," Hip Shot roared.

Lance moved sideways away from Jackie as swiftly as a gliding snake, while she darted away from him in the opposite direction.

Hip Shot fired twice, his bullets ripping the just vacated spot. Then Lance was on his feet, and shooting.

From that instant, action was so fast Jackie could not keep track of it. She knew that Lance's first bullet had torn into Hip Shot and sent him reeling. But only a score of feet yonder, Henry Cole, Toothy and Shorty Doan were plunging into the fight.

As spiteful whine of singing lead and thunderous crash of gun fire burst against her eardrums, Jackie felt panicked until there came the steadying thought that she must help Lance.

She must!

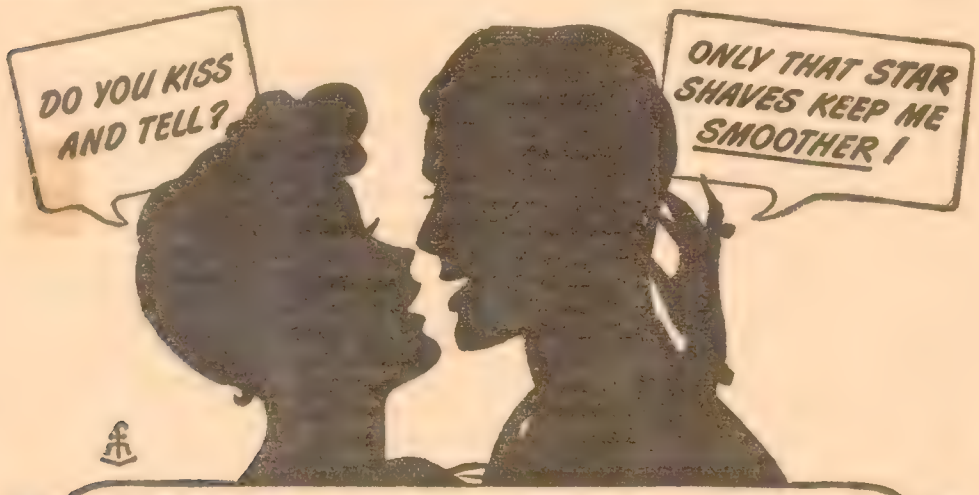
Crouching on one knee, holding in her hands the heavy gun which had belonged to Toothy, she sent her first bullet into Henry Cole's right shoulder. Her second shot was wild, but her third struck one of Cole's legs and the two wounds put him completely out of the fight.

She was aware that Toothy and Shorty Doan were emptying their .45s wildly at her and at Lance. Yet no bullet had touched her, and Lance was still on his feet as Toothy went down in a sprawling heap.

Suddenly the roar of gunfire slacked off, and Shorty, his weapon empty, was running like a scared rabbit toward the willows. In that moment Jackie heard Lance's gun-hammer click on an empty shell.

She leveled her own Colt at Shorty's pumping legs and as the heavy .45 kicked back in her hands the fellow sort of folded up. The ground caught his body.

[*Turn page*]



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Jackie wanted to help Lance, who had sprung forward to check up on Hip Shot, Cole and Toothy, but strength had gone out of her and her knees felt like soft rubber. Now that the terrible danger was over, she had wilted.

Soon Lance came running to her.

"You hurt, partner?"

"No. It's just—just that I'm not a man. Go see about Shorty before he drags himself into the brush."

"Hip Shot's dead," Lance answered. "I've tied Cole and Toothy."

He raced to where Shorty lay squirming.

A new sound, the hurrying beat of hoofs, made itself known to Jackie and she willed that she get up on her feet. Fishing shells from her pocket, she reloaded her gun ready for more trouble.

A horse materialized carrying two men—Ike Watson and her father.

"Don't shoot!" she called, running toward them. "This is Jackie. The fight's all over."

Watson halted his horse. Hearndon slid off the animal's rump and came close to her.

"Daughter, were you in that ruckus?"

"Yes, Dad. Now don't fly all to pieces. Mr. Watson, Lance and I found out that Henry Cole and the two gunfighters and your Shorty Doan were behind all the trouble. I think you should apologize to Lance for all your—your downright cussedness."

"Wh—why," the old cowman blustered, "at last I believe you, girl. Sure, I'll 'pologize to Lance, and to you. You see, after me and Lance split up followin' our man hunt, I got thinkin' I must see what Hearndon had to say."

A GRIN creased Hearndon's features, so long unaccustomed to smiling.

"Watson caught up to me as I was hoofin' it toward our camp," he put in. "When I'd told him 'twas Cole, after lying to me about the Porcupine Hills range, who'd persuaded me to come here, and how he knew early this morning of the scrap Lance was sure to get into with Watson, we both smelt a skunk."

"It was then I reckoned Shorty had lied to me," Watson took up the story. "Hearndon hopped up behind me and we came to see Mister Skunk Cole. Hearndon, I ain't never forgettin' your daughter saved my life. I'll go give Lance a hand."

Alone with her father, Jackie waited for the cantankerous man to start his tongue-lashing. To her amazement however, when Hearndon spoke at last it was gently and considerately.

"Jackie, if you can find happiness with Lance I sure won't stand in your way. God knows you deserve a break after all you've put up with from me. Your mother deserves a break, too."

"Oh, Dad, you are human after all!" Jackie cried, tears swimming in her tired eyes.

"I'll sell the sheep and make your mother a real home somewhere," Hearndon continued.

At this moment Ike Watson returned, with Lance at his side.

"I heard you, sheepman," Watson said. "Make Mrs. Hearndon a home here on Cole's ranch. It's sure going to be for sale. By gosh, I can sort of square myself with Jackie and Lance if I help you buy it and help you get cattle! Lance, me and Hearndon'll hook up one of Cole's teams and take them fellers to town. Do everything's necessary, too. Here's my horse for you and Jackie to ride to your Slash A. Pick up her pony and go on with her to her mother."

Jackie felt Lance's strong arms close lovingly around her as he lifted her into the saddle. Easily he sprang up behind her and guided the horse toward his own snug little house on Slash A.

The shock and horror of this day and night were already fading in the joy of their great love and already the panic in her mind was replaced by deep thankfulness and comfort. It was so good, so wonderful, to feel Lance's arms supporting her.

When the horse stopped at the division fence, Lance dismounted and lifted his arms joyfully. Jackie slid into them and under the silent approval of the great blinking stars she lifted her face for his kiss.

●

Coming Next Issue: HER HEART RIDES HOME, a glamorous complete novelet by Lee Bond—plus romantic novelets and stories by Syl MacDowell, Harold F. Cruickshank, Joe Archibald and many other favorite writers!

"You're listening to me this time, Miss," Todd said

Hard to Handle

By KATHERINE McCOMB

Wild, hare-brained, beautiful Kitty Dolan stages a little practical joke which lands her in deadly rustling danger!

KITTY DOLAN urged her horse along the winding cow trail through the dense brush of her father's Bridle Bit Ranch. The chaparral, mesquite and prickly-pear were like old faithful friends after six months of Miss Barnes Finishing School in San Antonio.

"Wildcat Kitty," her father and the punchers had called her ever since she had been an imp of seven, when she had chased a wildcat on her pony, and but for the timely interference of Hank Mason, the foreman, she might have been badly clawed. She became Wildcat Kitty and she had remained that in spite of Miss Barnes' best efforts to smooth off the rough edges and turn her out a "lady."

"Finishing school!" now she scoffed under her breath.

Who wanted to be "finished", anyway? Her lips parted in silent laughter and her brown eyes sparkled mischievously as she remembered that it was Miss Barnes who had been nearly finished when Kitty climbed out of a two-story window, sneaked across the campus to where a carnival was in progress, and rode a bucking horse to a standstill for twenty-five dollars.

Kitty had just alighted from the animal and was taking a bow from the cheering spectators when she met the shocked expression of the austere spinster, Miss Barnes, who was just then returning from a shopping tour.

Still laughing at the memory, Kitty rounded a clump of brush. The laugh died instantly as something hissed above her head. Before she could move, a lariat dropped around her shoulders, pinning her arms to her sides. She left the saddle to land with a thud on the hard-packed earth. Her hat flew off and her brick red hair flew down, spilling in a fiery cascade over her shoulders and back.

She came to her feet like a released spring. As the rope slackened about her, she snatched her gun from its holster. She whirled, five feet of fury, and she faced a young man in gray Stetson, flannel shirt and leather chaps.

He sat his horse, and amusement and amazement were striving for mastery in his smoke blue eyes.

"Why, you impudent brute!" stormed Kitty. "One move out of you and I'll drill you so full of holes that the woodpeckers will take you for a dead oak stump and store acorns in you!"

"I'm—" began the cowboy confusedly.

"I don't care who you are or where you're going, so long as you get started pronto. Savvy?"

"But I'd like—"

"I don't give a hang what you'd like! Is roping a girl and dragging her off her horse your idea of a joke?"

"I wasn't joking."

"Oh, so you weren't joking! Maybe you were planning to kidnap me!"

The man's weather-tanned face flushed with anger.

He swung from his horse and took a step forward.

"Stop!" Kitty ordered.

HE DID not waver. Her gun roared. His hat flew from his dark brown hair. His long arm went out, seized Kitty, shook the gun from her grasp. As she opened her lips to protest, a hand clamped firmly over her mouth. He pulled her forward until his eyes were on a level with hers. She was conscious of a hard-muscled jaw, a square chin and a wide, good-humored mouth.

"You're listenin' to me this time, Miss," he said calmly. "I was chasin' a steer. He disappeared in the brush here. When I heard your horse, I naturally supposed it was the steer, an' I threw my lasso. Now do you understand? I wasn't playin' a joke. I wasn't tryin' to kidnap you. What anybody would want with a gal that needs as much handlin' as you do is more than I can see. Now you better go home."

He released her and turned to his horse. Without a backward glance he swung up to the saddle and rode nonchalantly away.

Kitty stared after him, for once in her life speechless. Of all the unadulterated nerve! Who did that cowpoke think he was, anyway? Jesse James or Napoleon?

She went to her horse standing quietly behind a clump of brush. As she rode toward home, she kept thinking of the man who had dared lay a finger on her.

There had been no woman on the Bridle Bit since her mother died. Kitty then was six. She had grown up petted, pampered and spoiled by her father and Hank Mason, the foreman, and all the hired hands.

They had taught her to ride, rope and shoot with the best of them. But they never missed an opportunity to rib her unmercifully, and she took the greatest delight in reciprocation.

That's why she hated it at Miss Barnes' school. They were all so prim and sissified. One of the girls had become highly indignant when Kitty playfully called her an ornery son of a sick Siwash sidewinder.

Though the men at the Bridle Bit had hurrahed her and played all manner of practical jokes on her, no one had ever laid a restraining finger on her until today.

When she reached home, her father, the grizzled foreman and several cowboys were standing near the bunkhouse talking. Their faces were serious. Kitty looked them over with a critical eye.

"What's eating you hombres?" she asked with mock severity. "You look as gloomy as if you were on the way to your funerals."

"It's nearly that bad, honey," her father, a thick-waisted, iron-muscled man in his middle fifties, replied, running stubby fingers through his short, red hair. "Rustlers keep runnin' off cows a few at a time."

"Well, why don't you make these good-for-nothing cowboys get busy and catch 'em?" exploded Kitty. "What are they hanging around here for, anyway?"

Her blue eyes ran scathingly over the men from aged foreman to young wrangler.

"Now, Miss Kitty," protested Foreman Hank. "Ain't that school learned you no manners whatever? Cowboys is human beings. Five or six of us can't cover half o' South Texas, watchin' an' nursin' ever' cow critter in this brush."

"Not if you're too busy watching every biscuit Wong puts into the oven," Kitty came back at him.

"An' that reminds me," taunted Sam, eyeing his daughter sternly. "How come you ain't in the house cookin' vittels an' sewin' pretty things an' playin' the pianner, like I paid out good money for you to learn, 'stead of gallavantin' around a-straddle of that hoss like a hare-brained tomboy?"

"Because she's a wildcat, that's why," chimed in Chuck Winters, a bowlegged little wrangler. "Cats can't change their spots—"

He broke off to dodge the coiled lariat Kitty sent spinning his way.

"Lay you two-to-one I'll bring in a rustler before any of you loafing beef-eaters," she challenged, a sudden brilliant thought prodding her brain.

"Listen at her talk!" yelped a cowboy, his sun-darkened face slashed by a wide grin.

"Only way you could catch a rustler, baby, would be to sprinkle salt on his saddle," teased big Sam. "Now run along. We got work to do."

She unsaddled her horse and went to the house. But the minute the men were gone she came out, resaddled, and rode away.

It was easy to retrace her route to the spot where she had been so unceremoniously jerked from the saddle. The strange puncher had admitted that he was trying to rope a steer. She hadn't given the statement a second thought in her anger. But why should he be roping steers on the Bridle Bit, unless he was a rustler?

It was no easy matter to follow his trail through thorny mesquite, chaparral and steep-banked arroyos. She kept going, finding a hoof mark here, another there. Finally she saw the track of a cow, then another and another as he had made his gather in broad daylight. He had a nerve, that hombre!

It was mid-afternoon when she first glimpsed him. He was hazing several cows toward the broken mountain range that hedged the Bridle Bit on the west.

Kitty began to circle, keeping well hidden behind the brush. Half an hour later she swung back into the trail, ahead of him. Behind a clump of brush she waited, letting the cattle pass.

THEN, as the horseman came opposite, she whirled her lariat and let it settle over his arms, as he had done to her earlier in the day. But his horse, traveling at a walk, stopped, so that her victim was not unsaddled. She kept the rope taut as she came forward.

"I thought I sent you home, or don't you have a home?" he asked, his eyes darting to the Bridle Bit burned on her mount's hip.

This time Kitty wasn't talking. She was acting. She rode her horse round and round in a circle, until the man was bound from shoulder to waist.

"There! I reckon that'll hold you, Mr. Rustler!" she cried, when she had finished and tied the rope.

"What do you mean?" he asked, staring blankly. "You don't think I'm a rustler?"

"I don't have to think, for there's the proof," she answered glibly, gesturing toward the cows that had scattered and were beginning to graze.

"But I'm not a rustler," he protested. "You're makin' a mistake."

She rode in close, lifted his bandanna up to his lips and tied it securely.

"Nobody but a sheriff would want an hombre that needs as much handling as you do," she grumbled, a vindictive gleam in her brown eyes. "Now get going."

He moved forward, his eyes twinkling, as if he were enjoying some huge joke. She kept a sharp watch on him as she herded him down the trail. He went meekly, but now and then a tremor quivered along the muscles of his broad back, as if he were laughing to himself.

The sun was dipping behind the hills when they rode into the ranch-yard. Her father and the boys were back from their chores. She reckoned they'd all sit up and take notice when she rode in with the rustler. Some-

one saw her coming and gave a loud whoop.

"Here comes Wildcat Kitty with a prisoner!"

That brought everybody stomping from the bunkhouse.

Sam hurried from the ranchhouse at double-quick stride.

"Here's your rustler, Dad, and you won't find any salt on his saddle," Kitty said exultantly.

She tore her eyes from her father's amazed face and let them slide disdainfully over the group of cowboys.

In heavy silence old Foreman Hank stepped up to the prisoner, yanked off the bandanna and peered into his face. Hank reeled back on his high heels with a sound like an exploding boiler, then seemed to get a grip on himself.

"Desperate lookin' varmint, ain't he?" he said, scowling darkly. "You shouldn't be tacklin' jobs like that all by yo'self, Miss Kitty."

The other punchers were crowding close to get a good look at the rustler.

"Where'd you catch the coyote, baby?" Sam inquired, eyes twinkling.

"Over in the west pasture," Kitty explained importantly. "He had gathered half a dozen cows and was hazing them toward the mountains."

"Why, the ornery polecat!" growled someone.

"Only way to deal with a critter like that is string him up," suggested another.

"That's right," said still another puncher.

Kitty's heart leaped into her throat. She hadn't thought of what they might do to her captive. Her eyes went appealingly to her father and Hank. They shook helpless heads.

One of the boys had found a rope. He came running forward. Kitty glanced at her prisoner. He met her look frankly, unafraid. Suddenly she was spurring her horse close to his.

"No, you won't lynch him!" she cried, snatching out her gun and leveling it at the oncoming men. "He's my prisoner. I'll turn him over to the sheriff. And I'll let daylight through the first cowhand who tries to stop me!"

"That's the stuff, baby!" boomed her father.

Hank burst into convulsive laughter. That was the match that touched off the explosion. The cowboys shouted and yelled with uncontrolled mirth. Even the prisoner was shaking with laughter. Kitty began to smell poison bait.

"What's the matter with you dad-blasted cow nurses?" she demanded angrily.

Gasping, tears running down his weather-reddened cheeks, Sam answered.

"This rustler you brought in for gatherin' Bridle Bit cows happens to be on the payroll, honey. Hank hired him yesterday."

Kitty's eyes flashed like heat lightning at the stranger.

"But his horse?"

"That's his own crowbait," explained Sam, still weak from laughter. "Todd McIntyre, meet my daughter Kitty."

"Wildcat Kitty," roared a cowboy.

"We've met a couple o' times already," Todd said, meeting her sizzling glance with an audacious grin. "I tried to tell her that she was makin' a mistake."

Kitty whirled her horse, rode to the corral, unsaddled and stalked to the house, looking neither to right nor left. But she was painfully conscious of masculine titters.

"Wildcat Kitty always gets her man!" taunted someone.

They'd never let her rest, that bunch of hellions. Not until she turned the tables and put them in their place.

KITTY and her father ate their meals at the ranchhouse. So she was saved the embarrassment of meeting her prisoner again for several days.

From a concealed position she would watch him rope out a horse, saddle and swing up, every muscle coordinating gracefully. She saw him ride away, whistling a care-free tune.

She had made a fool of herself before him and the whole outfit. They had had their laugh. But her time was coming.

"She who laughs last—" she said, a determined light kindling her brown eyes.

One morning nobody was laughing. Twenty head of prime steers had disappeared from a pasture near the home ranch. Their trail had been covered so well that nobody could follow it beyond Crow Creek where the badlands began.

"I tell you somethin's gotta be done!" bellowed Sam, his face a combustible red. "Next thing we know, they'll be ridin' right into the home corral an' stealin' our one milk cow from under our noses."

"Riding into the home corral—" whispered Kitty, the thought a tempting bait.

At that minute a hand touched her arm, sending little sparks of excitement shooting all the way to her shoulder. Her eyes snapped up. Todd McIntyre stood there, his smoke blue eyes smiling into hers.

"I've never had a chance to thank you, Miss Kitty, for savin' my life."

The smile spread over his face, jerked up the corners of his good-humored mouth, dug a dimple in his left cheek.

"Saving your life?" Kitty's eyes were indignant question marks.

"Why, yes, when the boys wanted to give me a necktie party. That was a fine thing, Miss Kitty. You didn't know it was all a joke."

"Next time, I'll help them," she snapped and turned away.

But the spot on her arm where his fingers had rested, still tingled, as if she had touched a nettle.

Soon the men mounted and rode away, leaving Kitty alone on the ranch. Wong, the Chinese cook, had gone to the village on an errand.

Now was her chance to get even.

She ran into her father's office, kicked over a chair and turned over a table, spilling its contents of books, papers, nails, bolts and small hardware over the floor. She ripped off a piece of her white blouse sleeve, left it clinging to a splinter on the desk corner, then ripped off a blouse button and dropped it on the floor. Surveying her work, she decided that it was good. The room looked as if the battle for Texas independence had been waged here.

She ran down to the corral, saddled her horse and roped two others. Then she opened the gates and turned the remaining horses in the pen loose. With a horse snubbed close on either side, so that the tracks would make it appear that she were a prisoner between two riders, she hurried away.

She laughed to herself as she rode. The Bridle Bit boys would make a fool of her, would they? Even pretend to string up her prisoner! Well, when they found her tracks, they'd come bent-for-murder after her. And she would give them the chase of their lives before she let them catch her, and then laugh them to scorn.

At Crow Creek, she turned the extra horses loose, hazing one up the stream toward a lone oak that stood like a sentinel on the bank and the other downstream. Then she headed straight into the hills, where only an occasional hoof mark was left on the rocky soil.

As she rode, the country became more and more rugged. Chaparral brush and stunted mesquite nearly cut off the trail. Once, she left a few threads from her frayed blouse sleeve clinging to a thorn. Another time she dropped a comb from her hair. Many times she broke branches from the bushes.

By early afternoon, she was in a maze of arroyos and canyons that she never knew existed before. She began looking for a good hiding place. One where she might take a few pot-shots at the boys as they rode in—just to give them a real thrill before she walked out and gave them the raspberry. Up the mountain a few hundred yards, she saw a formation of up-ended red rocks, looking for all the world like a ready-made stockade.

She rode forward, closely scrutinizing the wall for a pass. She found it finally, a small gateway between two towering rocks. She was just about to ride through the break when a rough voice called out—

"Ain't you a mite off your beat, Miss?"

She jerked her glance up to a black-whiskered little man who stood on a rock, a rifle slanted down to cover her.

"Why no!" she said quickly. "This is my father Sam Dolan's grazing land. Who are you?"

He stood looking at her with little shoe-button eyes, a grin twisting his tobacco-stained mouth. Suddenly he laughed, a cackling sort of sound.

"Well if this don't beat all! I reckon the boss will enjoy this. Ride on in, Miss."

Kitty hesitated. This was something she hadn't contracted for. Her hand slid toward the gun at her hip.

The man's rifle tilted up threateningly.

"I wouldn't try that, Miss," he warned. "Better ride on in like I said, with your hands up."

Kitty kneed her horse forward. Inside the pass, the ground was strewn with heavy boulders. Several yards from the entrance, the earth dipped away to a shallow bowl. In the bowl she could see a small rock-and-log house. Back of the house were cattle grazing. Her breath caught. Here was the rustler hideout.

She stopped, but the little man urged her on with his rifle, on down the lip of the bowl to the crude rock cabin.

A rough-visaged man near a corral stood

watching curiously. A barrel-bodied man of middle age and a youth in his late teens came up from the shed behind the cabin.

"Where's the boss, Slats?" asked Kitty's captor of the youth.

The man jerked his head over his shoulder at the rock cabin.

"Take my watch in the pass for a while," ordered Kitty's captor importantly. "I got business with the boss."

He turned back to Kitty.

"Get down," he ordered sharply, and when she had done so, he lifted her gun from its holster. "Reckon you won't be needin' this."

BEFORE they reached the cabin door, it opened and a man stood framed in the entrance. He was under average height, stocky, close-knit, hard-muscled. Several days' growth of black beard hedged a coarse face. His hair was coal black, his eyes dark slits in which surprise was for the moment the dominant expression.

"What's this, Weasel?" the cabin owner asked, stepping from the door.

Self-satisfaction radiated from Weasel.

"This is Kitty Dolan, Duke. Old Sam's gal. She rid right into our front yard."

"Sam Dolan's gal!" exclaimed Duke, face darkening. "What you bring her here for?"

Weasel chuckled. "I tol' you she brung herself. I couldn't let her go back."

"Bring her inside," snapped Duke. His loose lips took on a crafty smile. "Yes, bring her in. This may prove to be a very profitable visit for us."

Still chuckling, Weasel ushered Kitty into a living room lined by half a dozen unmade bunks. There were unwashed dishes on a rough table beside the open fireplace and a greasy skillet and blackened coffee pot on the hearth.

"Set down," ordered Duke, pointing to a crude bench beside the table.

"I prefer to stand," said Kitty, glaring furiously at him. "Whatever plan you're hatching in that crime-infested brain, you'd better ditch it pronto if you want to keep on breathing. When my father hears of this, he'll wipe the whole bunch of you off the map."

"Now ain't that interestin'," said Duke. "My guess was that he'd be willin' to pay a right smart price to get you back safe, an' leave us go unmolested."

"Why, you dad-blasted cow thief!" stormed Kitty. "You'd add kidnapping to rustling!"

She stopped. She might have pretended innocence of their game, but it was too late now.

Duke's smile broadened.

"We was doin' right well drivin' Bridle Bit cows up here, slaughterin' 'em an' haulin' the beef to the Army post in the next county. We wasn't complainin' none. Then you come bustin' right in without no invite. We can't turn you loose to go back to your old man. We either got to get rid o' you or make him pay us damages for our ruined business. I reckon you oughta be worth twenty thousan' bucks."

"Twenty thousand dollars!" gasped Kitty. "You know my father couldn't raise that much money."

"By mortgaging the ranch an' the cows, he could easy," said Duke.

He strode over to a shelf in the corner and came back with a piece of wrapping paper and a stub of a pencil. He sat down on the end of the bench, raked back the dirty dishes and laid the paper on the table. For several minutes he labored with the pencil. When he looked up, his face wore a pleased expression.

"Sam Dolan," he read his writing slowly. "If you want to see your daughter alive, leave twenty thousand bucks in gold under the lone oak on the east bank of Crow Creek not later than forty-eight hours after receivin' this notice. If you fail, or if you notify the sheriff, or try any tricks, the girl will pay. This is no joke."

The last four words made Kitty's heart jump. She had started this escapade as a joke on her father and the boys, but it had turned serious. It would cost her father a small fortune, probably ruin him, unless he rode in here on her trail. Then it might cost his punchers their lives. It would be her fault. If she got out of this, she'd never play a practical joke on anybody ever again.

"Sounds pretty good, don't it?" Duke inquired, grinning up at her.

Kitty looked straight ahead, never batting an eye.

"Call the kid," Duke ordered Weasel, who stood proud-chested beside the door.

The youth from outside came in, sapling tall and straight, a reckless light flooding his blue eyes, an arrogant tilt to his rock-hard chin.

"Take this note to the Bridle Bit," Duke said sharply. "Leave it on the barn or gatepost. An' don't let any hay grow under you

afterwards. Be sure to cover your trail. Our necks depend on you, Kid. Understand?"

The youth swelled with importance.

"I savvy. Just leave it to me, Duke."

"That's what I'm doin'," growled Duke. "An' I don't want no slip. Now get goin' an' take a fast horse."

The messenger turned and swaggered from the room.

"Better lock the girl in the storeroom," Duke told Weasel, jerking his head toward the lean-to at the rear of the house.

Weasel herded Kitty into the storeroom and locked the door. The place was dingy and smelly.

As Kitty's eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she saw an old saddle across a bench, several pairs of well-worn boots, a barrel half-filled with flour, and above it a row of shelves containing a sack of coffee, a gallon bucket of molasses, a gallon bucket of lard, a side of bacon and several cans of tomatoes. In one end of the room was a dirty bunk, with a small square hole of a window above it. There was no other opening.

KITTY sat down on the bunk, anger burning in her veins. The coyotes! They couldn't get away with this. They couldn't!

Todd had once said she was hard to handle. What would he think if he saw her sitting here like a bogged yearling? Again her eyes sought the square hole. She was small, but nobody could squeeze through that unless—

Her eyes snapped back to the shelf, and in them was a desperate light.

The sun dropped behind the mountain and darkness fell over the rustler hideout. In the next room Kitty could hear men talking. The ugly cook unlocked the door, came in, and took supplies from the shelf. He went out, locking the door again. Soon Kitty could smell coffee and bacon cooking. Later she peeped through a crack and, saw Duke and Weasel seated with other big ruffians at the table. Slats was probably on guard.

But there had been six rumpled bunks. Then she saw the small, round-shouldered cook hunkered down in front of the fire, broiling bacon on a long stick.

She got up and began to undress, taking off everything but her boots. She made her clothes into a tight bundle and dropped them through the window. A blanket off the bunk was tossed after them. Then she took the lard from the shelf and began to smear her body.

When she was greased from shoulders to knees, she poked her head out the window and looked all around. The moon winked mischievously from the mountain rim, but nobody else was looking. Satisfied, Kitty began to wriggle through the window.

She was through to her hips when the lock on the storeroom door rattled. She froze in terror, then wrenched herself back into her prison.

"Stay out of here!" she cried ferociously through the panel. "Can't a lady have any privacy? I'm in bed."

She recognized the voice of the man outside the door as Duke's.

"Don't you want some supper?" he asked.

"Don't want anything! Just leave me alone!"

With a quiver of relief, Kitty heard him move away. Again, she attacked the small window. Again, she stuck for an agonizing moment. Then, with a mighty twist, she slid through, landing in a crumpled but silent heap on the blanket.

She snatched it up, wrapped it around her and edged around the cabin, holding her clothes in her arms. From the house she darted to the shadow of a tree, then from bush to bush until she was some distance away.

In the deep shadows of a clump of brush, she dressed quickly, wishing she dare try for a horse. But that would be tempting her luck too far. If she could get past the guard in the pass, they likely would not miss her till morning.

By then, she would be well on her way to the ranch. Perhaps she might even meet her father and the punchers, if they were following her. She crept up the incline, keeping to the shadows, wondering how she would ever elude the guard in the pass. Half-bent and walking as light as an Indian, she rounded a clump of chaparral and nearly bumped into a man.

He whirled, his gun covering her.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered, "if you want to live."

"Todd!"

The word was a glad whisper as she threw herself forward. For a moment he held her tight against his chest, with her heart pounding and beating. Then memory stirred in Todd.

"Kitty!" came his choked whisper. "What

are you doing here? How did you get away?"

"I slipped through a mouse hole," she told him, with a suppressed giggle. "But how did you get here?"

"My horse went lame an' I went to the ranch for another. Found them all gone except the one Wong rode. Then I found the office upside down an' you gone. I took Wong's horse an' followed the tracks. Somethin' fishy about those tracks, though. Only one horse was carryin' a rider."

"Smarty!" she cried. Then she confesed. "I started out to play a joke, but it turned sour."

Quickly she told the whole story.

"I met the young rustler with the note to your father," Todd supplied. "He's tied up back yonder in the brush. I used his horse an' hat to fool the guard, then tapped the guard on the head."

He broke off. Steps were coming up the path.

"It's a new guard comin' to relieve the one I knocked out," whispered Todd. "You stay here, Kitty. I can't let him find that hombre."

He disappeared as he spoke.

Kitty crouched low as a barrel-bodied man passed not ten feet from her. She followed stealthily. When she could see the pass, Todd was seated on a rock, his hat pulled low, a rifle across his knees. The rustler walked up to him.

Todd came to his feet with the speed of lightning, his rifle barrel crashed down on the unsuspecting man's head. Without a sound the big rustler crumpled and lay still. Kitty ran forward.

"Good work, cowboy," she whispered. "Now let's make tracks. We'll get Dad and the boys."

"How many's in the rustler gang?" Todd asked.

"There were six. You got three. That leaves three down at the cabin."

"You go on," he told her. "Get the young outlaw's horse an' head for the ranch. I'm goin' down an' corral those other hombres before they get wind of trouble."

"There'll be three against one, Todd. If you go, I'm going, too."

"You're stayin' here," he told her stubbornly, "if I have to tie you beside this hombre."

He was tying the rustler's hands and feet as he talked. Then he took off the bandanna from the man's neck and made a gag.

"All right, Mr. Bossy," growled Kitty, picking up the guard's rifle. "Mind if I keep this? You can't tell what might happen."

"That's a good idea," Todd agreed, grinning. "I'm going down now. They'll think I'm the other guard comin' in. But before fireworks start, you get out o' here an' head for the Bridle Bit."

SHE nodded. Then Todd was swinging down the path. She watched him go, a multitude of emotions seething in her breast. She loved that stubborn cowpoke. Loved him so much that it hurt.

Suppose he walked into a trap? Suppose they killed him? The thought brought a chill of horror. Before she realized it, she was slipping along the path, the rifle gripped in her hands.

She saw Todd in the distance move quietly down the trail, walk nonchalantly up to the cabin door and kick it open. The light glinted on his six-gun as he stepped inside.

Then something went wrong. A gun barked. The next instant all was confusion. Guns blasted and blazed in the cabin.

"Todd! Todd!" she cried over and over.

Then she saw a man leap through the cabin door. It was Duke. Todd leaped after him. Duke whirled, and his gun spewed flame. Todd stumbled and fell headlong into the yard. Duke's gun was coming up to fire again when Kitty whipped her rifle to her shoulder and squeezed the trigger. Duke staggered a couple of steps, then sank to the ground.

Kitty's throat was dry with dread, her heart a lump of iron in her chest. Then she saw Todd leap to his feet and run over to Duke.

"Todd! Todd!" she cried, joy in her voice. "Todd, I thought—"

"My spur caught on the doorsill an' tripped me," he explained, disarming Duke and tying his hands and feet. "That saved my life. His bullet missed me by inches. But his next wouldn't have missed if you had let him shoot it."

"What about the others?"

They hurried into the cabin. Weasel lay sprawled beside the table, his rustling days over. Slats was stirring over by the fireplace. A bullet graze on the temple had knocked him out temporarily.

Todd stooped to tie him, but the sound of galloping hoofs brought him erect. He

snatched up the fallen guns, grabbed Kitty by the arm and hurried her out into the shadows. They waited, guns ready.

A dozen riders came down the trail, reined up in front of the cabin.

"Dad!" cried Kitty, running forward. "Dad! Hank!"

"What's goin' on here?" demanded Sam Dolan, swinging from the saddle. "We heard shots. This some more o' your dratted jokes, honey?"

"It's no joke," spoke Todd, producing the ransom note he had taken from the rustler's messenger.

Quickly they told what had happened.

"Well, looks like you two have left nothin' for us to do but clean up the mess," chuckled Sam.

He ordered some of the boys to round-up the stock, others to hitch up the beef wagon and haul the dead and wounded in to the sheriff.

"Hurrah for Wildcat Kitty!" thundered someone as they moved away. "Told you she always gets her man."

"An' that reminds me," Todd said when they were alone. "Didn't I tell you to head for home if trouble started?"

"Which proves that it doesn't always pay to do as you're told," she shot at him impishly. "If I had done that, you might have been killed. Duke might have been free. Anyway, I never did believe in aping that boy who stood on the burning deck eating peanuts by the peck."

She stopped with a gasp as Todd drew her to him.

"You little devil," he said with mock severity. "I always knew you'd be hard to handle. But I reckon the fun will more than offset the effort."

Her lips began to form a saucy retort. But before she could utter it his mouth came down on hers, firm, possessive, demanding.

For a second she remained stubbornly rigid. Then she yielded herself to his embrace, her lips to his kisses, and she found in them the answer to her most thrilling dreams of love. Hard to handle? Why, she would always be hard to handle if Todd took this means of gentling her.

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A Complete
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"Oh, I didn't expect to find you here!" May Carroll said, as her glance hurried from Eve to Luke Sinclair, and she continued to smile coldly

Outlaw Carnival

By ANITA ALLEN

Eve Wilding, who is fascinated by handsome, dashing young gambler Luke Sinclair, must make a swift decision between loyalty and love when grim killers menace the rangeland!

CHAPTER I

Flutter in Cards

AS she entered Denver City, Eve pulled her pony to a walk and wished the grim, middle-aged waddie was not riding beside her. But Jim Larkin, whom her father had appointed escort and guard, was always present. And since the sleepy village had boomed into a gold strike city she had been permitted to visit it only on the occasions when he accompanied her.

Their horses plodded up "Sixteenth Street" and carried them into a gaudy, noisy carnival. The wooden sidewalks were crowded with miners, ranchers, storekeepers, Indians, medicine men and tramps. The dusty thoroughfare was noisy, jammed and strangely exciting.

Heads turned and men halted to stare at Eve. Some of the younger ones, seeing only her loveliness, stepped from the sidewalk directly into her pony's path, but Larkin spurred his mount ahead, one hand on his gun.

They retreated and Eve pretended she had noticed neither them nor the waddie's silent threat.

On either side of Sixteenth Street were clusters of wooden buildings separated by open lots which contained wagons and booths selling everything from buttons to medicine. Occupying other empty spaces were Indian lodges and at the corner of Larimer was The Denver House, the town's best hotel. Beyond it was another vacant lot but this held only a small table at which a man was shuffling a deck of cards.

Eve's glance touched the man and halted. She drew in at once and later realized she had stopped automatically, as if reaching her destination. But now she only realized there was something familiar about the way he stood, in the lines of his tall body and the poise of his head. She was sure she had never before seen him, but still there was the swift tightening of the throat and stirring of the senses which comes at the sound of a half-forgotten song.

"This isn't anything to see," Larkin told her. "Just a tin-horn gambler down on his luck."

"In a minute," she murmured, scanning the man's face. He was grinning out at the crowd, flipping the cards into the air and shuffling them again. His grin was crooked and amused.

"Step right up, folks." he called. "I'm just waiting to take your money. You haven't got a chance."

Part of the noisy throng paused and again the cards flashed in the sunlight. Eve burned with anger. A sharp anger which sent the blood drumming across her flesh. Most people in Denver were adventurers or at least looking for easy money but this was the cheapest kind of swindling. A card sharper. A trickster.

"All right, gents. Don't stop unless you've got plenty of money. You can't win!" This was what he told the men drifting toward his table.

ABRUPTLY, then, his glance lifted and caught Eve's. She stiffened as if a stranger had touched her and the tiny drums of anger beat more fiercely in her blood. But she looked steadily back at him and their measuring glances locked.

His grin disappeared and he turned to the crowd.

"Here you are! This ace of hearts—" He held it up "—is the winning card. Watch it closely. Now I'll cut twice and put the cards face down, holding out this one card which I'll put in place right under your eyes.

"If you point it out the first time you win, but if you miss, you lose. I take no bets from paupers, cripples or orphan children. Who'll go me twenty?"

Eve's lips felt dry and there was an echo of the little beating drums in her ears. A man like that should be working to shape the new world around him. Instead, he lived by cheating.

Her glance ran over him again, taking in everything about him. The big-brimmed gray felt hat. The gray vest under a dark jacket. The flashy stock tie and well pressed trousers tucked into fancy boots. Her glance paused and she squeezed her eyelashes together to stare at his feet.

His boots, made of Spanish leather, had an ace of hearts carved on each instep.

He was looking at her again. She felt his glance and lifted her own to meet it.

His eyes were hazel. Clear, gray-green hazel beneath brows as soot-black as his hair. He grinned and color stung into her cheeks, for the grin was more than amused. It was challenging! As if he were aware of her contempt and laughing at it.

She got out of the saddle, trailed the reins and started into the crowd.

"Wait, ma'am!" Jim Larkin called. "I'll be right with you."

But she went on and the men pushing toward the table stepped aside in amazement. With so few white women in the town that everyone dropped whatever they were doing when one appeared in public, a girl like Eve was startling. By the time she got through the jam most of them had lost interest in cards or gambling and were trying to follow her. But a young miner, his back toward her, was ready to place a bet.

"The ace of hearts is the winning card," the man behind the table said. "Watch it closely."

After cutting the deck he held up the ace of hearts and then pushed it under a pile of cards. Eve, who had noticed that it had a bent corner, was puzzled, for no one could miss on such a choice.

"Now, sir." The grin was showing again and the hazel eyes glinted. "The ace of hearts is in one of these." He moved his hands carelessly above the cards, apparently without touching them.

"You take the one you want," he drawled.

The miner dropped twenty dollars on the table and poked a finger at the cut under which the ace of hearts had been placed.

"That's your choice? We'll see, mister."

The cards were flipped over, but the ace of hearts did not show. Instead, the bottom card was the ten of clubs. It, too, now had a bent corner.

There was a brief scuffling behind her.

"I'm here, ma'am," Jim Larkin said.

She nodded, without turning, and took a twenty-dollar gold piece from her purse.

"I'll try it."

The gambler's hand closed over the deck.

"You mean you want to bet?" he asked and his eyes said he had been steadily aware of her.

"Yes."

His glance flicked away, over the shifting throng of men.

"You shouldn't be here," he murmured. "A girl like you walking into this mob! I'll have to get you out in a hurry. When I start for the street, stay close behind me and—"

"I said," she broke in, her voice clear and light, "that I'm betting. Or don't you want my money?"

His eyes darkened and lines cut into the flesh between his brows.

"All right." His mouth was straight over the words and for the first time she noticed its look of strength. "Pick your card. You can also name the one that's to be winner. What'll it be?"

"Ace of hearts."

He began to shuffle the cards, but he was watching the jostling men trying to get closer to the girl.

"This'll turn into a fight," he said, his voice dropping. "You won't be safe."

HE held up the ace of hearts with its bent corner, thrust it under a pile of cards. "There you are," he said. "Take your choice."

"I will," Eve stated, pleasantly. And her hand dropped to the gun at her waist. Flipping it up, she leveled it. "Now step back from the table and don't move your hands near the cards—no matter how far above them."

His gaze, which had become green, pushed into her eyes and he stepped back.

"There you are, ma'am, but you're not playing according to the rules. The idea is I gamble the quickness of my hand against that of your eye. If I can switch cards faster than you can see—"

"Oh, no! You're careful to put the winning card into a certain cut so people'll be tricked into picking that one and no other. Then you switch it."

She reached out, flipped over the cards and the ace of hearts came up.

"I win."

"Yeah." His grin was very crooked and there were flickering points of light in his eyes. He put a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table beside hers.

She picked up the money, thrust her gun back into its holster.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome. Now, we'd better figure a way to get you out of here."

A harsh bellow of laughter broke over his words as the crowd, which had gone utterly still when she drew the gun, realized the full meaning of her victory. Smiling, she turned from the table and found herself encircled by a solid wall of men with hungry, frightening eyes.

The gambler caught her arm and drew her back but Jim Larkin broke through the human wall with a gun in each hand. He stood in front of her, weapons leveled.

"Out of the way, boys," he said. "This is Bill Wilding's daughter and my orders are to perforate any hombre who bothers her."

The motley throng which had given way to the pull of feminine beauty, moved aside and Eve nodded at the man behind the table.

"Thank you," she said. "I've always thought it would be fun to gamble."

"Glad you enjoyed it. In case you want to try again, my name's Luke Sinclair and I'll be somewhere around town. Maybe, to be sure you can find me, I'll make this my permanent stand. I'll even buy new cards—pretty ones."

"The kind with hand-painted backs? You know—forget-me-nots and turtledoves?"

"No. They'll be gold—very pale, the way gold looks when its mixed with silver. That'll be just the color of your hair. And I'll have 'em trimmed in brown to match your eyes."

"Miss Eve," Jim Larkin's voice was a growl. "You've got to leave. If this gang changes its mind I'll have to fight our way out. Pretty smelling gamblers won't be much help then."

Angry color streaked across her cheeks but she followed him to the street, past the

crowding men. As she got into the saddle she glanced back and saw that Luke Sinclair was still watching her.

CHAPTER II

Queen of Hearts

IT was mid-afternoon when Eve and Jim Larkin started up the southern route toward the Locked W. The trail skirted a ridge of foothills and crossing South Park, cut its way through a tangled wilderness of brush.

With the foothills behind them, Larkin spoke.

"We'd better keep our eyes open now," he said. "This section's bad—seems to be the favorite spot for road agents."

Eve smiled. "You and Dad are always talking about outlaws and road agents. You make it sound as if there's an army of crooks on this range."

"There is." Larkin spoke grimly. "Since the Greggory gold diggings opened criminals have poured in here from all over the country. There are so many outlaws in this section the Federal Government's thinking of sending troops—" He broke off, leaned from his saddle and caught the cheek strap of her pony. "This is it. Right ahead."

At the top of a bend, a horseman was sitting his mount so that it blocked the trail. A neckerchief covered the lower part of his face and a pulled down hat brim hid his eyes. A leveled rifle was steadied across his arm.

"Well!" Eve's hand moved toward the gun at her waist.

Larkin jerked her hand up. "No. He's got the drop on me. If I was alone, he'd find out that doesn't always win the deal but I don't figure on having you hit by stray lead. If all he wants is our money, we'll give it to him. Otherwise. . . . Well, come on. He's waiting for us"

They nudged their ponies forward, the waddie riding ahead of the girl.

"Stop right there." The outlaw's voice was muffled and roughened. "Put your hat on the ground and drop everything you've got, into it. Money and gold dust. Be nice and I'll let you keep your guns. Might need them for some of these nasty road agents." His eyes showed ugly humor.

Larkin threw down his hat, pulled coins from one pocket a small bag of dust from another and tossed them into it.

"Your turn now, ma'am." he told Eve.

"Nope." The outlaw drawled. "I never rob women—it's bad luck. You can go ahead, but don't try to follow me. I'll be close enough to stop you."

Eve lifted the reins but as her glance touched the man's boots, her hand dropped. They were of Spanish leather and on each instep was an ace of hearts. Her lips broke apart, but she caught back her swift words.

"Besides, there may be lots of those boots sold in Denver—which caters to criminals and gamblers," she thought. And instead of Sinclair's gaudy clothing, he was wearing jeans, a black shirt and a black felt hat.

"Get started, quick!" Jim Larkin murmured.

She rode after him, toward the masked horseman, who suddenly wheeled his horse off trail into the brush.

"Hurry!" Larkin said. "Road agents often change their minds and come back to search their victims—just to be sure."

Eve pushed her mount into a gallop and stared up the rolling trail. The outlaw had been big. Approximately Sinclair's size. It would have been simple to change clothes, ride half way to the Locked W and wait for them.

But why hadn't he also changed his shoes? Boots like that, almost his identification as a card sharper, would be remembered by everyone who had ever seen them. Maybe gamblers who turned outlaw made such blunders. . . .

At the ranch, Jim Larkin rode to the house with her.

"I want to let your Dad know about the holdup," he explained.

They entered the rambling log and 'dobe house but Eve's father was not in his office and Mrs. Redman, the tall, spare-bodied housekeeper, came out.

"The boss is out," she told them. And then, eyeing Larkin suspiciously, she added: "You act like something's up. What happened?"

He hesitated and Mrs. Redman turned to the girl. "If I ran this ranch, nobody'd work on it unless they had plain, ordinary human manners."

Eve grinned at Larkin.

"I'll let you know when Dad gets home,

Jim," she said.

Crossing the entrance hall, she turned into a narrow corridor which led to the East Wing. The first part of the Locked W house had been built when Bill Wilding, as a young rancher, was struggling to make a living from a few hundred acres. As the Locked W prospered, he had added numerous rooms, but retained the small, original structure in memory of his dead wife. Finally, he had erected several wings and connected the whole, confusing affair with erratically wandering halls.

EVE'S room faced east toward the gates and four windows kept it flooded with light. As she closed the door, the mirror on the opposite wall was filled with her reflection and she walked slowly toward it. Was her hair really the color of gold mixed with silver?

She lifted her hands and brushed it back from her face.

"That's not a bad description," she murmured.

There were fine bones under her young flesh, which gave balance to her slim curves and made her seem almost tall. Her head was nicely poised on a throat smooth as taut velvet and against the paler-than-gold hair, her amber-toned eyes were darkly wistful. But her small, tilted nose was gay and so was her mouth. Her blue riding costume was daring, for the divided skirt was short, the heavy silk blouse had only brief sleeves, her neckerchief was deep violet and her boots were hand made.

The chunk of slowly moving hoofs sounded from the gates. Going to the window, she pulled aside the curtains to glance out. A pony, entering the yard, was carrying double! And a slight, frightened looking girl was being held in the saddle by a man riding behind her. The man was Eve's father.

She ran from the room, reaching the entrance hall as Wilding and the girl were entering the door.

"Glad you're home, Eve," her father said. "This is May Carroll. I found her about a mile north of the Overland Trail sitting beside a wrecked wagon. She'd lost her way and her horses bolted. Broke free and left her afoot on the range."

As Eve took her hand, the girl looked at her with dark, bewildered eyes.

"I hope you don't mind having me. I don't know what would've happened if your father hadn't arrived."

"Don't talk about it," Bill Wilding broke in. "Being dumped on the range after all you'd been through is enough to throw anybody. Eve, fix her up in one of the spare rooms and find her some clothes. You must be about the same size."

"Of course," Eve said, her glance going from the girl to her father who, in spite of his maturity was still lean and fit. His gray hair merely stressed the youthfulness of a face which had been moulded by hard work, humor and a quick temper.

"Come with me, May," she said. "I'll put you in the room next to mine."

She led the way through the labyrinth of halls and opened the door to a sunny, pleasant room.

"You can rest while I talk to the housekeeper about hot water."

"Don't let me be too much trouble," May Carroll said. "Just being here's like—heaven! I didn't know anyone could be so kind as your father."

"We ought to thank you," Eve laughed. "We like company and ranches in this district don't have many visitors." But as she turned away, she was suddenly uneasy. May Carroll's eyes had seemed strangely measuring.

Going down the East wing hall, she entered another passageway which took her to the kitchen. "Mrs. Redman?"

"I'm here," Nellie Redman stated.

But the girl was looking past her at a man seated beside the table, his long legs sprawled over a chair. It was Luke Sinclair and as his glance met hers, he untangled his legs and got up.

"Howdy, ma'am. This is a surprise," he said, and grinned. The crooked, amused grin which belonged on the face of a freckled ten-year-old.

He was dressed as he had been in Denver City. Gray vest under a dark jacket, gaudy stock tie and trousers tucked into the Spanish leather boots which were stamped with an ace of hearts. There were two holstered guns against his thighs now instead of the single weapon he had carried in town.

"That's too mild a word," she said. "I'm more than just surprised." And the new, disturbing anger was coming to life again making tiny drum beats roll through her body. "How'd you get here?"

"I came to see my old friend, Mrs. Red-

man. Nellie and I knew each other years ago, in Kansas."

Eve pulled her glance away from him and looked at the housekeeper.

"I didn't know you were from Kansas."

"Maybe I never told you." Nellie said, crisply. "But your father's always known it. Luke was ten years old then and I expected him to be in jail long before this. Never met such a hellion."

"I see." The girl murmured. "It must be nice to meet again. We'll have a guest for supper—a Miss Carroll whom Dad found stranded and afoot on the range. She'll probably stay with us for awhile."

"Stranded and afoot on the range?" Sinclair repeated. "That's strange. Was she alone?"

SHE glanced at him quickly. "Yes. I don't know much about it, yet. She just got here." She turned to the door and nodded. "Welcome to the Locked W."

"Hold on," he said, and followed her into the narrow hall, closing the kitchen door behind him. "I came here to see you."

His eyes seemed green even in the dusk of the corridor. Jade green touched with light. She told herself to move away, to break the awareness of each other. But instead, she lingered.

"I thought you were visiting Mrs. Redman?" she said.

"I am. And we did know each other a long time ago—I met her in town—she'd driven to Denver in a buckboard and almost ran me down. She told me she was working on the Locked W and I figured that gave me a chance to see you again. I've heard your father doesn't want anyone from Denver City on his spread—that he gets unpleasant about it."

"You would, too, in his place. The home ranch and a lot of our range is between Denver and the Greggory Diggings. There's a constant stream of prospectors moving through to the hills and they steal anything they can find, especially cattle. They start range fires and ruin water holes."

"Yeah." His voice sounded dry and almost amused. "Will you meet me after supper? I'll wait for you in range lane."

"Meet you? Are you staying for supper?"

"Sure." The dusk distorted his grin. "Mrs. Redman invited me."

He had not moved but he appeared to be closer. So near she could hear the faint sound of his breathing.

"Your name suits you," he said, his words low. "Eve. That means both paradise and hell."

"And it suits me? I represent hell?"

"It depends," he said. "I haven't had time to be sure. Maybe you just look that way."

Her eyelids squeezed together and she tilted her head. Why didn't she leave? Why was she still standing here, watching him bend over her? Would he actually try to kiss her?

His lips found hers almost quietly. And his hands closed slowly on her shoulders. Then something happened to the twilight space about them, for his kiss was no longer quiet but fierce as the crash of a sudden mountain storm. The drums of anger beat faster but muffling them now, was flame; the flame which spread from his lips to hers.

His arms tightened, drew her against his deep chest. Then he released her.

"I'll be in the range lane right after supper," he said.

And turning back into the kitchen, he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER III

Bold Gambler

EVE'S father seated May Carroll beside him at the supper table. Across from her was Luke Sinclair whom Nellie Redman had introduced to Bill Wilding.

"A lad I used to know when he was a child," she had said. "His folks lived near me in Kansas."

Bill Wilding accepted him with his usual hearty hospitality. But Eve, at the foot of the table, wondered what would happen if he discovered his guest was a card sharper doing a street "pitch." She glanced at Mrs. Redman, seated between herself and Sinclair, but the housekeeper was watching May Carroll.

"I heard your schooner team ran away and left you afoot on the range," Luke Sinclair said. "Don't tell me you were making the trip across continent alone!"

"Yes." May Carroll's eyes were very dark and her face very white. The yellow striped gingham dress from Eve's wardrobe stressed the delicacy of her coloring and she was

almost startlingly lovely. "That is, I was alone when the accident happened. When I left St. Louis my father was with me. We were coming to the gold fields and he got sick. He insisted on going on even when he was so weak I was doing all the driving and everything else. Then—" Her voice dropped "—he died. Some people passing through with a wagon train helped me. He was—buried beside the trail and there was nothing for me to do but finish the trip. It was too late to turn back."

"That took nerve—plenty of nerve," Bill Wilding put in. "A young girl traveling the overland route alone! I don't know how you ever made it."

"Neither do I," Sinclair said. "Considering not only the mountain route and the rivers you had to ford, but some of the men heading for the Greggory Diggings. Usually a pretty girl alone would've found herself married or kidnaped before she was half way across. Didn't any of the wagon trains ask you to join them?"

"No-o. I don't think so. But I'm not sure—the whole thing's like a nightmare. I don't like to talk about it because then I remember Dad!"

"Of course," Bill Wilding said. "You need to put the whole thing out of your mind. And we're going to see that you do."

May turned her head, quickly. "Thank you, Mr. Wilding," she said. "I didn't know there were people like you."

He beamed, but glanced at his daughter. "Eve, Larkin told me you were held up on the way home."

"Yes. He robbed Jim."

"Well, I'm not standing for any more," Wilding growled. "Not even if I have to do the sheriff's job. Tomorrow I'm taking on as many men as I can hire. I'll have the whole section guarded, starting at Denver and going right up to the Greggory Diggings. The prospectors have stopped killing just a few steers at a time—now they're stealing cattle on a big scale. Yesterday two hundred head were taken from the range south of the diggings. But from now on I'm making things too hot for these road-agents and outlaws."

"Are conditions that bad?" May Carroll asked.

Luke Sinclair answered her. "Even worse, ma'am."

"Have you lived here a long time? You're another rancher?"

"No. I arrived just a few days ago from Kansas so I'm not a rancher—yet."

"What do you do?" The question was soft.

"Anything that'll earn a living—same as the rest of the people in Denver City."

Bill Wilding's glance sharpened. "Not many ways to make a living there. At least, not an honest living."

But Luke was pushing back his chair and speaking to Eve as if he had not heard.

"Do you mind if I go now, ma'am? I'm meeting an old Kansas partner in town at nine o'clock." Then, looking at her father: "Sorry, sir, I didn't realize how late it was."

"Go ahead. Go ahead." But the rancher's eyes were still sharp.

Sinclair's gaze caught Eve's in a clear signal and when Mrs. Redman left the table to see him out, Bill Wilding frowned after them.

"How about sitting in the living room?" he asked, absently. "Everyone finished?"

May Carroll took his arm. "You don't know how wonderful this seems," she said. "Sometimes, on that terrible journey, when I was frightened, I dreamed of living like this, of being safe again."

Eve did not follow them. "I want to open my mail," she said when her father looked back. "I brought a lot of it out from town but there hasn't been a chance to look at it."

SHE watched May tilt back her head to smile up into the rancher's face, then went to her room in the East Wing where she stared at the pile of letters on her desk but did not touch them. Luke Sinclair was expecting her to meet him. Without bothering to explain why he wanted to see her alone, he had taken it for granted she would be there, simply because he wished it!

"That's the sort of thing he would do," she told herself. "Arrange secret meetings. Or maybe that's the only way he can talk to people who aren't—his own kind."

Her glance strayed to the open windows through which moonlight poured to mingle with the glow of the oil lamps. Leaving the desk, she walked across the room with nervous speed. Pulling aside the curtains, she slipped over the window sill to the ground, less than three feet below.

Hurrying away from the house, she circled across the yard and around to range lane which was lined with cottonwoods. Sinclair stepped out of the shadows and taking

her hand, led her to the edge of the range.

"We were too close to the house up there," he said.

"Why the secrecy? And why did you want to see me?"

"For several reasons. But first, have you ever looked at yourself in the moonlight?"

"No. I don't lug mirrors around at night to look at myself."

"Try it, some time. You shouldn't miss anything so beautiful."

"Thanks. But the reasons you wanted me to come here?"

"That was one of them. This is another." His hands slid up her arms to her shoulders and brought her close. "I wanted this—minute—while I could get it."

"If you—"

His lips stopped her words. His arms closed and held her tightly against him while the tiny drums began to beat through her flesh. The first, swirling winds of a storm tore at her and the elements met in a crashing, wild struggle.

A few feet away was the serene brightness of the night. But here, with his lips on hers, was the chaos of a mountain night, as if the earth and sky fought against each other.

"Stop this!" she told herself. "Maybe it's a trick—practised trickery—like anything else about him." But her lashes drooped and she felt herself surrendering. She knew she was responding to his kiss.

Then, she stiffened and whirled out of his arms. There had been a footstep behind them!

"Oh, Eve!" May Carroll cried. "I didn't expect to find you here."

Her glance hurried to Luke Sinclair and her lips moved into an odd, faint smile.

"I didn't expect you, either," Eve snapped. "We were just going back to the house."

"Really? I thought Mr. Sinclair had to meet someone in town."

"Where is Dad?"

"In his office. He had work to do, but he's been telling me the most interesting stories. All about how he started this ranch when he and your mother were first married."

THE faint little smile stung Eve.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "He was deeply in love with my mother and has never stopped missing her although she's been dead for ten years."

May Carroll's eyes rested on Sinclair. "Love like that's unusual, isn't it?"

"Maybe not, ma'am. Maybe it happens to every man—once. We'd better go back."

May walked between them as they went up the lane. Near the house, Luke spoke to Eve.

"Good-night, Eve," he said. "*Adios*, Miss Carroll."

As he rode out of the yard, May Carroll's glance followed him.

"There's something about him—something interesting," she said. "But he's not a man your father would approve."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. I'm just guessing. But don't worry; I won't talk."

Eve lifted her head and looked directly into the other girl's eyes. Then without speaking, she turned into the house. . . .

After dinner next day, May Carroll announced she intended to spend the afternoon resting in her room. Eve followed her father into his office.

Closing the door, she spoke abruptly.

"Dad, I'm beginning to wonder about May Carroll. She has told us nothing of her past; nothing except a vague story about a prairie schooner."

He looked at her astonished. "What's there to tell except what we've already heard? She's simply a nice young girl who's had very bad luck."

"We have only her word for that."

He leaned across his desk. "What are you getting at? Don't you want her here?"

Eve's face warmed. "No, I don't!" she said.

Wilding's eyes showed the swift flaring of his anger. "But she's only been here a day. You sound like a jealous kid—as if you begrudged that girl a little peace and security! Yet she's more thoughtful than you are. More like a daughter—"

A brisk knock interrupted him and Mrs. Redman opened the door.

"Sheriff Michaels is here," Mrs. Redman said.

The sheriff stepped into the office and nodded at Eve.

"Howdy, ma'am. You're looking prettier than ever."

"Thank you."

"Oh, stop this fancy manners stuff, Bob!" Wilding barked. "And you get out, Nellie." The housekeeper left the room. "No reason you can't stay, Eve. It'll give you a chance to hear about the law in Denver City."

Michaels, a thick-shouldered man with a

tired, friendly face, pulled a chair up to the desk.

"I was told Miss Eve and one of your men were held up on the trail."

THE rancher laughed. "So you show up now, when the road-agent's had time to reach Mexico! And you don't even mention the wholesale rustling going on right under your nose. Locked W cattle have been stolen, in big lots. By one outlaw or gang of outlaws. Every job's the same—showing the same person plans 'em all. I've got so many waddies I feel as if I'm keeping an army but the thieves always know which section has the fewest men on it. That's the one they raid. Then, as soon as I pull riders off a range that's quiet, the cattle *there* is run off. So I'm hiring more hands—real gun-sharps. Those deputies of your's couldn't catch a sick gopher. They're all four-flushers." He cursed fluently, remembered Eve, broke off in the middle of a word and snapped: "Eve, you shouldn't sit there and listen to such language. Better leave."

She grinned at him and went out, hurrying across the entrance hall to the front door. At the corrals she found Jim Larkin waiting.

"I'm going to town," she told him. "That means you're nursemaid again."

He nodded unsmilingly and brought their ponies, but as he finished saddling, his glance shot toward her. "I saw Sinclair, that card-shark, here last night."

She peered into his unreadable eyes. "Yes. He's an old friend of Mrs. Redman's."

CHAPTER IV

Dark Suspicions

JIM LARKIN did not speak again until they were entering Denver City.

"Where to, ma'am?" he asked.

She hesitated, then remembered a bootmaker a block beyond the Denver House.

"I need some riding boots, and I'm going to try that new place," she said.

The jumble of carts, wagons and ox-teams crawling up Sixteenth kept their ponies at a walk, and when they reached the lot beside the Denver House, it was empty.

Eve drew in and let her glance stray toward the hotel with its wide steps leading to the main door. Going up the steps was a slight dark girl who moved with gay assurance. May Carroll!

Wearing the riding clothes Eve had given her, she brushed unconcernedly past the crowding, staring men.

"What is it?" Larkin asked.

"You didn't tell me Miss Carroll had left the ranch."

"She said she wasn't going off the home spread. Just wanted to ride across range a few miles."

"Wait for me," Eve said, turning her pony. "I'm going to stop at the hotel."

"Oh, no. If you go into that madhouse, I go with you."

Jim Larkin had tied the ponies and was at her side by the time she reached the entrance.

The long front room or lobby contained card tables, roulette wheels and a bar at which three rows of customers waited. The rear of the lobby ran into the dining room and the noise of voices, dishes, and lusty music was deafening.

With Larkin opening the way, Eve moved through the jam until she saw May Carroll at a corner table in the dining room. With her was Luke Sinclair. May Carroll was talking steadily, almost anxiously, as if explaining, and Sinclair's gaze never wavered from her face.

Eve grinned, ruefully. Well, why not? She was very pretty and there was no rule against a man telling more than one girl that she was "beautiful." Nor against making love to more than one.

Turning her back on Luke Sinclair and May Carroll, Eve stared at the squirming throng in the front lobby.

"I want to try the roulette wheel," she told Larkin.

He nodded and once more went ahead. The customers hastily made room for her and, as she opened her purse, half a dozen gold dust pokes dropped onto the table.

"Use this, lady—no sense wasting your own."

"Please, ma'am. I'd like to watch a woman spend my money."

Larkin, at her side, kept a hand on his gun and elbowed away the more daring men. Eve placed a pile of chips on the nearest number and lost. She pushed another stack into the same place and won. She let it ride and when the wheel stopped again the croupier shoved out six stacks of blue chips.

"I didn't know you approved of gambling—or gamblers."

The words came from behind her and her whole body went still. Then the drumbeats were pounding through her flesh and she turned to face Luke Sinclair.

"Hello," she answered him. "I'm not sure about the disapproval. A lot depends on circumstances."

"Yeah." The hazel gaze pushed through the surface of her eyes. "I can see what you mean. There are gamblers and then there are swindlers."

Instead of answering she scooped up the stacks of blue chips.

"Where do I cash these?"

"I'll do it, ma'am," Larkin said.

"Thanks." Luke Sinclair told him. "That'll give us a chance to find a table in the dining room. Will you have dinner with me, Eve?"

Her eyes remained bright and cool. "On the Locked W, dinner's served at noon."

"Then supper—or lunch. Whatever you want to call it."

"I thought—" she stopped, for she had almost spoken of May Carroll, and instead, murmured: "Perhaps. That is, if you're alone?"

Light flickered across his eyes. "I am now. Larkin," he told the waddie, "I've got a hunch all the vacant tables will only seat two."

Jim Larkin's glance met his. "I wouldn't be surprised. So I'll be waiting here in the lobby."

A WAITER with a holstered gun under his apron led them to a table.

"I intended to go out to the Locked W tonight," Luke said, after she had ordered.

"Why?"

"To see you, Eve." His words began to hurry and suddenly, the gambler in the gaudy stock tie and sleek clothes was gone. The man opposite her now had a boy's eyes and mouth. "Last night—"

That most terrible of all sounds, a man's scream, tore from the front of the lobby. A gun roared and was answered with spattering lead. Shouts and curses were punctuated by the crashing of furniture.

"What's that?" Eve asked, startled.

"Another fight and a bad one," Luke said. "Come on." He caught her arm and put her behind him as diners leaped from their tables. "No chance of getting out the front way and there isn't a rear exit near enough. That may be something." He nodded at a door beside the kitchen. "We'll try it."

They ran across the room and he jerked open the door, thrust her inside. He groped for the bolt and shot it into place.

Eve found herself in musty darkness.

"Why are you locking the door?" she demanded.

"So people won't follow us and bring the fight with them. Stay where you are. I'll have a look."

He struck a match and they saw stacks of boxes and rows of food bins.

"We're in a storage room," Luke said. "Ought to be good enough for awhile." He struck another match, emptied a long box and turned it over. "Now, we even have seats."

She sat down, gingerly. "What do we do next?"

"Wait," he said as he sat beside her on the box. She stiffened.

"You needn't worry, Eve. I won't make love to you—unless you want me to."

"I wasn't—worried."

The wall shook as a table smashed against it. Farther away a gun cracked and a bellowing voice was cut off in mid air.

She shivered. "What started it?"

"Probably an argument at the bar or one of the gambling tables. There are half a dozen fights a day in this place but not many of 'em spread so far or last so long."

"I hope Jim Larkin's all right."

"He is. That's one hombre who can take care of himself. When this little interruption occurred," he went on, "I'd started to say I love you, but now it doesn't seem like such a good idea."

She sat even straighter and told herself that there was no beating, rolling echo in her flesh or exploding bits of fire in her blood.

"Does that mean it was merely an idea?" she said in what she intended as light, amused tones.

She felt him turn; felt his eyes trying to see her face in the darkness. "Not—quite." And his arms went around her. His lips claimed hers slowly and almost quietly as it had in their first kiss.

"Eve," he said, at last. "There *is* a chance for me."

But the ending of his kiss had also ended something else. The reckless fire in Eve was gone, leaving her uncomfortably conscious of the musty, breathless darkness around her.

"I've a right to an answer," Luke went on.

"Have you?" Her voice was taut and thin. "Then here it is. You're a—wandering gambler who can't ever mean very much to me. Neither could I mean a great deal to you and—" her words slowed as she thought of May Carroll—"I'm probably just another girl in another wide-open town."

His arms dropped and he freed her. Something in the swift gesture struck at her senses and she got up, words she did not want to say pouring from her lips. "Maybe you're even worse than a gambler! The first day I met you Jim Larkin and I were held up on the way home. The holdup man was wearing boots just like yours—of Spanish leather with an ace of hearts on each instep."

Still he did not speak and she suddenly grew uneasy.

"The fight's stopped," she said. "There's not a sound from the lobby or dining room."

"Yeah. We can leave. But first tell me more about those boots on the road-agent. Sure they were exactly like mine?"

"Yes. Of course, if they're readymade, a lot of people may have bought them."

"No. They're made to order. The ace of hearts design was my own idea."

SHE waited, her breath crowding back into her throat.

"Seems as if we can go out now," he said after a pause. "I'll try it first."

The bolt scraped as he opened the door. The dining room was littered with smashed tables, broken dishes and wrecked mirrors.

Standing in the entrance, his face calm, was Jim Larkin. "When I was looking for you during the fight, I heard you talking in that storeroom," Larkin said to Eve. "So I waited here."

"Thanks," Sinclair answered. His glance caught Eve's. "Afternoon, ma'am. It was nice to have a talk—even in the dark."

But his face was still and unreadable. He was once more a stranger.

* * * * *

As the brilliance of sunset began to fade, Eve walked restlessly through the house and out to the porch where May Carroll looked up from her book.

"Your father's late," she said to Eve. "When he left this morning he promised to be back early. Driving that cattle from the Red Hill to the High Tree range shouldn't take long, should it? He said High Tree was only about five miles east."

Eve was silent.

"Why should he bother doing a thing like that?" May Carroll went on. "If the cattle's going to be stolen—why, it'll be stolen anywhere."

"Maybe not. The herd was on Red Hill which is directly on the route taken by all the miners and prospectors. Dad hasn't been able to hire enough men to guard that entire district. And on High Tree, the stock will not only be out of the way of prospectors but harder for cattle thieves to reach."

"I hadn't thought of that," May Carroll murmured. "This country must be filled with outlaws. It makes me wonder about every new person I meet. After Luke Sinclair was here I couldn't get him out of my mind. There was something—almost dangerous about him—"

She broke off, sharply, and Eve turned toward the gate. Hoofs were thudding slowly toward them. The hoofs of several ponies moving at a walk. A Locked W waddie entered the yard, leading a laden horse flanked by two other riders whose guns were in their hands.

The led pony was carrying an unconscious man!

Eve sprang to the ground.

"What is it?" she called out. "What's happened?"

The first rider gestured grimly. "Your Dad's been shot. Rustlers jumped us as soon as we got the stock onto High Tree range. Must've had the whole thing planned and known everything we were doing."

"Never mind that! Is Dad—is he—badly hurt?"

"I don't know. One of the boys has gone for the doctor. Let's get him into the house."

She stumbled ahead of them.

"Call Mrs. Redman," she said to May Carroll. "Bring water and towels."

Stripping open the bed, Eve watched the men place Bill Wilding on it.

"Be sure someone's gone for Dr. Small," she told them. "Send another rider so there won't be any mistake."

They tiptoed out and she began to cut away her father's blood-soaked shirt. The wound was in his side, below the ribs, and she gasped at the sight of it.

"I'll take care of him." Nellie Redman had come in and was standing beside the bed. "Know more about bullet wounds than you do. I've had plenty of experience. Go out and take—her with you." The house-

keeper nodded at May Carroll.

It was only then that Eve saw May Carroll at the foot of the bed, staring at the rancher with terrified eyes. She followed Eve into the hall, unwillingly.

"Why can't I help?" May Carroll said. "I want to—he's been so kind to me—so wonderful!"

"You'll just be in the way."

"But what'll I do?"

"Wait. We can sit in the living room. Mrs. Redman'll call us if we're needed."

"No. I'll stay here. It's closer."

Eve thrust back her sudden irritation and went to the living room where she sat in a chair opposite the door. Watching and listening for the first sound of the doctor's arrival made each minute expand into dragging eternities.

DR. SMALL, arriving two hours later, went directly to Bill Wilding's room and she had to wait through more endless time. But when he came back to her he was smiling.

"Don't look so worried, Eve. It's not a bad wound and Bill's healthy as a steer. The shock knocked him out, not the bullet. He'll be almost new in a few days."

"Then he's conscious?"

"Sure. And mad as a prize bull. Seems he and his men had just finished driving a herd onto the High Tree range when the raiders struck. There were more than a dozen outlaws in the gang. Bill only had four waddies with him but they must've put up quite a battle because the raiders left without a head of stock."

"Can I talk to him now?"

"Why not? I'll be around tomorrow for another look at him."

Eve went to the door with the physician and as she turned back May Carroll came slowly to her side.

"Do you suppose that the man who held you up on the trail was the same one who shot your father?" she asked.

"What makes you think of that? Holdup men or road-agents don't usually steal cattle."

"They might do anything, from—gambling to killing."

Eve went still and her eyes sharpened against the other girl's face. May Carroll had speculated about Luke Sinclair the first time she met him. Had again mentioned him in connection with the hordes of outlaws overrunning the range. Now, she was once more reminding Eve he might be involved in the rustling of Locked W cattle.

Yet May Carroll had been with him in town the day before and had probably met him there at other times. It was even possible they had known each other before May Carroll arrived at the Locked W, in spite of her story of traveling across the continent alone.

But in that case why would she attempt to make the Wildings suspicious of him?

"Maybe she's really trying to get information for him," Eve decided. "Perhaps she wants to know how much *we already* suspect."

Her breath slowed as the memory of Luke Sinclair's arms suddenly swept over her and for a painful second, his lips again seemed to be on hers, engulfing her in storm.

"You can sit in Dad's room for a couple of hours," Eve said, carefully. "I'll look after him during the night."

"I'll be glad to! But I wouldn't mind staying with him until morning."

"No. We'll take turns." Eve moved away as if neither had been thinking or talking of Sinclair.

CHAPTER V
The Truth

WHEN ten o'clock came Eve opened the door of her father's room and May Carroll left her chair near the window.

"I'll take over now," Eve said.

"Let me stay with him. I'd really like to."

Eve shook her head. "No. You've done enough."

Reluctantly May Carroll left. After glancing at the rancher's sleeping face, Eve went to a couch on the other side of the room and stretched out to rest. The night was so still she could hear only the light sound of her father's breathing and finally her eyes closed against the faint light from the single, shaded lamp.

She awoke to find the darkness tinged with gray and hurried to the bed. But the wounded man was still sleeping and she glanced around the room with puzzled eyes. Something had awakened her. Some definite sound.

Then she heard it again. A quick, light noise from the yard.

Someone was moving away from the house, their footsteps swift and light. Sudden, unreasoning fear touched Eve. Going to the door, she opened it noiselessly, ran to the front door. Pushing back the bolts, she went out to the porch and saw the slight figure darting through the gates. In spite of the dim light, she knew that the person racing for the road-trail was a girl.

"May Carroll!" Eve told herself. "Why, where is she going at this hour?"

Hoofs began to beat against the hard earth of the wagon road, starting south at top speed.

"That means a pony was waiting!" Eve thought. "It was left on the trail, maybe hidden behind the brush by May Carroll, or someone working with her. Which means this was planned hours ago and she had everything ready. Probably that's why she wanted to stay with Dad—it would be easier to leave the house unnoticed."

Turning back, Eve hurried to Nellie Redman's door and banged on it.

"Get up!" she called. "Right now."

When the door swung open, she gave the housekeeper quick instructions.

"Go to Dad and stay with him."

"Why, what's happened?"

But Eve was already half-way to her father's office, where she got a gun from his desk, strapped on a belt and pushed the gun into the holster. Locking the front door behind her, she crossed the yard and brought one of her ponies from the small corral. And eight minutes later she was in the saddle, a mile from the ranchhouse and pounding for the wagon road.

May Carroll had gone south and Eve was sure she would find her. Maybe when she found her she would also have the answer to Luke Sinclair. And the truth would wipe all thought of him from her mind, stop the memory of flame on her lips.

The trail ahead was empty and she did not catch sight of May Carroll until she was half way to Denver City. Then, she saw May Carroll only briefly, for the trail curved and shut off her view. When she glimpsed May again, there were two riders ahead. But one of them was far behind the other and seemed to be attempting to overtake the first!

A few minutes later the trail swept into the high brush district and the overhanging weeds blotted out everything ahead. When she emerged, both riders had disappeared and Denver City was only a short distance ahead.

"I'll find her," Eve repeated. "This place is still small enough for that."

She cantered her pony down Sixteenth to Denver City and got down at the hitch-rack. There were only a few people on the street but the hotel, entirely recovered from the battle of the day before was functioning as if it were noon. The front doors were open, showing that the lobby was crowded, the bar and roulette wheels doing a brisk business.

As she fastened her horse, her glance strayed over the lobby and stopped on a girl approaching the door. Her white face seemed frightened and the man with her seemed to be leading her from the hotel. But the man was not Luke Sinclair. Instead, he was short and dark with strangely wrinkled eyelids in a bulbous face.

They came down the steps to the sidewalk and Eve bent her head, hoping they would not notice her standing the pony. Apparently they did not, for they turned east down Sixteenth and the man's thick hand was clamped on the girl's arm. As they neared the end of the block, Eve started after them, walking quietly and slowly.

They disappeared and she quickened her stride, but, near the corner, lights blazed in the uncurtained windows of a new restaurant and she glanced in. May and the heavy-faced man were sitting at a table near the wall and the man was bending forward, staring at her with hard dark eyes as he talked. She was nodding, twisting her hands together nervously.

EVE pressed her body against the wall so that she could not be seen from inside and watched the man talk steadily for what seemed minutes. Then he got up, turned to speak again to the girl and started for the door. Eve darted into the shadows and held her breath as he turned east, toward the hotel.

When she glanced through the window again May was still sitting at the table and Eve knew she was waiting for the man to return.

She went to the door, opened it and smiled at the waitress who came forward.

"I'm—joining someone."

May leaped to her feet. "Eve! How did

you—why are you here."

"I followed you. Sit down."

"No. I'm leaving. I can't stay!"

"Sit down." Eve repeated and the gun flipped from the holster into her hand.

May dropped into a chair, her face whiter than ever, her eyes huge.

"What do you want?"

"I think you know. Who did you send word to about Dad shifting stock from Red Hill to High Tree range? You needn't explain that you weren't stranded on the range when your team ran away. I know that wasn't true—maybe I always knew it. But I want to know who you're working with?"

"You—you're crazy! I just came into town because—"

Eve slipped the muzzle of the gun over the top of the table. "Don't think I won't use it," she said coldly. "This country breeds tough people, May—tough women as well as men. Whoever you've been working for tried to kill my father so I wouldn't hesitate to shoot you if I had to."

The big, dark eyes stared like those of a sleepwalker.

"I—think you would!" she said through white lips. "I wish I'd never seen this country. But I didn't want to get into this. Phil Redman made me."

"Phil Redman?"

"That's the man who just left—the one you saw me with."

"Who is he? But where did he go when he left here?"

"I don't know—back to the hotel to meet one of his men. And you'd better get out. They're coming here."

"Why didn't you wait at the hotel? Instead of coming here?"

"As soon as I got in, he grabbed me and rushed me out. The sheriff—and Luke Sinclair were in there. Phil got the idea they were waiting for us—for him."

"Redman's the name of the Locked W housekeeper. Is he—"

The door of the restaurant opened again and May shot to her feet, a moan breaking from her lips. Michaels, the sheriff entered first, pulling the thick-set dark man whom the girl had said was Phil Redman after him. And behind them was Luke Sinclair.

His hazel eyes went blank as he saw Eve.

"You crazy, reckless kid!" he said, striding to the table. "Did you butt in on this?"

"Why not?" she demanded. "I wanted to find out who May was working for. She had to be the one who supplied the information on the cattle going to High Range."

"So you took a chance on being killed by Redman's gang!"

"Maybe you'd better tell me what *you're* doing here?"

But the sheriff, still half dragging his prisoner, grinned at her. "We couldn't figure who was pulling the cattle thefts on the Locked W until you mentioned one little fact to Luke. You said the man who held you up had an ace of hearts on his boots. That made Luke remember the day he met Nellie Redman in town, he'd picked up a new pair from the shoemaker. He was carrying them in a box when he stopped her buckboard and got into the back seat to swap gossip about Kansas. He left the box and forgot it."

"I understand," Eve said. "Go on."

"But after he talked to you he knew the holdup man had gotten 'em from Mrs. Redman. It also explained how the rustlers knew everything that was going on at the Locked W."

"Why, of course," May Carroll's voice cut in shrilly. "Mrs. Redman must be Phil Redman's wife! She worked with him."

Redman straightened, his thick body going stiff as he glared at the dark girl. "You're lying and know it. Sheriff, my wife didn't have anything to do with this. I came here after I got out of the penitentiary—I'd done time for armed robbery—because there'd be good pickings in a gold town. I knew Nellie was working on the Locked W but May and I were friendly by then and I didn't see my wife. I sent for May to come out here and join me, but after I sized things up I went to the Locked W and made Nellie a proposition. She could give me information about the ranch and cattle, or I'd see her boss and everyone else knew she was married to an ex-convict."

MICHAELS smiled. "So she wouldn't help you, huh?" he said nodding.

"No," the ex-convict said. "She refused. But while we were talking in the kitchen I saw this box with the boots in it. The box was open and I remembered where I'd seen boots carved like that—and the man wearing them. Then the whole picture clicked into place. That card-sharper had been a kid in Kansas when I was sentenced to the Pen. His people lived near us. If I could still recognize him, why shouldn't he suddenly

remember me—and spoil the whole setup? I took the boots when I left and staged the holdup of Eve Wilding so they'd notice the ace of hearts on the boots. I figured somebody would hook them up with Sinclair and that would get him out of the way."

May Carroll was looking at him in horror. "You—you—"

"Never mind," Luke cut in. "Maybe it's the only decent thing he's ever done—protecting his wife. You're going to get off easy, May. The sheriff'll put you on a train for Kansas and forget all about you—if you promise not to come back."

"You mean I won't be—arrested."

He nodded. "You were just foolish. You're just another person Redman used."

She was silent and Luke pushed back his chair. "Guess this winds it up, Ed. I'm taking Eve to the ranch."

But outside, in the fierce morning light, Eve suddenly stopped.

"No," she said. "I'm not moving until I've learned a few other things. Why were you hunting outlaws? And you acted as if you'd known Sheriff Michaels a long time."

"I have. He's from Kansas, too, and sent for me to help him."

"Help him? How?"

"I'm a Federal man from Kansas—some people are beginning to call us 'rangers.' And Ed Michaels had too tough a job on his hands when so many criminals poured into the gold fields. He figured someone working undercover might find out what was going on quicker than he could."

"But how did you realize it was Redman—who was a stranger here?"

"After I knew where the road-agent got the boots with the ace of diamonds on them, it was easy, because I remembered Nellie Redman's husband had been convicted of robbery years ago. At first I thought she might be helping him, but then I saw May talking to him—the day we had lunch in the hotel. I asked about the tough looking dark gent and finally identified him. Tonight, knowing about the shooting, Michaels and I were waiting for May Carroll to meet him. We were sure she would."

"Then that gambling—the card pitch—was just an act?"

"Yeah. Still, I've done a little playing now and then."

"So I would imagine," she said, sharply, "You also met May Carroll in the hotel—or at least I saw you sitting at a table with her."

Luke grinned and took her hands. "This isn't a very private place, but it'll have to do," he said, and bent to kiss her. His kiss touched her mouth with flame and lighted a million tiny fires in her blood.

"I May Be Engaged to You—but it Doesn't Mean You Own Me!"

THAT was Julia Milton's defiant response when Larry Russel of the Rocking R demanded that she stop writing to Ed Grant, son of a reputed cattle thief. Julia, who owned the Running M outfit, had never lost confidence in the Grants—and despite the fact that she was promised to Larry, she still nourished a spark of love for young Ed in her heart.

When that spark bursts into flame it's the signal for a gun-thundering flare-up on the range! And Julia is thrust into the middle of a cowtown mystery that will hold you breathless when you read HER HEART RIDES HOME, the fascinating complete novelet by Lee Bond which is featured in our next issue.

It's a thrilling, throbbing romance of the rangeland which will enchant you as you follow the daring escapades of the lovely heroine in her battle for justice and love! You'll adore HER HEART RIDES HOME from start to finish—and it's only one of the many entertaining stories in store for you next issue!

WESTERN RANCH GIRLS

by FOGHORN CLANCY

FAMOUS RANCH AND RODEO EXPERT

BACK East, a show that went by the name of "The Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show" probably wouldn't sound very glamorous. It's different out West. Life in the ranch country is so tied up with cattle and horses that even social functions wear the brand. And there is no lack of color or glamor at a stock show and rodeo.

Take the one at Fort Worth, Texas, last March. Climax of the program was Gene Autrey's famous "Cavalcade of Pioneers." A group of pretty girls dressed in old-fashioned skirts and sunbonnets, with cowboy partners, had just gone through the graceful maze of an old time square dance. Under the prismatic rays of colored spotlights they made beautifully colored circles of movement as the wide dresses swung in the dance.

ROSEMARY COLBORN

As the applause still echoed, the scene had changed. A herd of longhorns shuffled up-trail in the background, just as though headed from Texas to Dodge City in the wild old days of the big drives. In the foreground, Gene Autrey, singing cowboy of the movies, came into the spotlight on his horse Trigger. With one graceful leap, the trained horse soared to the top of a piano onstage and there he poised while his master played and sang.

A Gorgeous Brownette

With so much talent floating around you'd hardly think anyone would notice one particular girl. But there were many people at the show who asked about the gorgeous brownette who rode a magnificent golden Palomino horse near the head of the Grand Entry.

The same girl had later ridden a black and white paint pony at breakneck speed through the difficult maze of the quadrille, or square dance on horseback.

This feat is considered so difficult, the turns and twists are so sharp and fast, that it takes an expert rider merely to stay in the saddle. And the lovely girl had performed her part with such ease and grace that everyone noticed her.

An American Beauty

She is indeed something to notice, this Rosemary Colborn, of Texas. Only seventeen years old, one hundred and twelve pounds of vivid health, flashing brown eyes and pearly teeth, she is the perfect type of wholesome American beauty, as lovely un-

Meet Rosemary Colborn, Lovely and Accomplished

Rosemary Colborn (right) riding a blaze-faced palomino, and a friend

der the strong sun of midday as under the flattery of colored lights.

Rosemary Colborn is the daughter of Everett E. Colborn, manager and co-owner of the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation, otherwise known as Gene Autry and Associates. The Colborn interests also include the great Lightning C Ranch, located in Dublin, Texas, in itself an enterprise almost as vast as the big business of producing rodeos.

Rosemary was born on a ranch—not the Lightning C, but an earlier ranch near Blackfoot, Idaho. Like most ranch girls she learned to walk and to ride practically together—and preferred to ride.

At the time Rosemary was born, her father, Everett Colborn, had already made a name for himself as a rancher, a rodeo producer and an expert handler of cowboys and stock. His skill in managing a rodeo program without hitch or mishap brought him an offer from the late Col. W. T. Johnson, then producer of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden, to be arena director for the biggest of all rodeos. So the Colborns moved into the big time.

Her First Pony

When they came to New York, Rosemary was three and a half years old. Col. Johnson became so fond of the pretty little girl who did her darndest to ride in the Grand Entry with the big girls that he gave her a sleek little dun and white paint pony with a special hand tooled saddle cut to her size, for her own use. And when the show was over, he insisted she take the pony back home with her.

On this little paint pony, which she named

Daughter of a Big-Time Rodeo Arena Director!

Ranger, Rosemary rode to school at May, Idaho, five miles from home from the time she was six years old until she finished the fourth grade.

At that time she was ready for a bigger pony. During all her school life she rode, week-ends and vacations, with her dad whenever he would let her go with him.

She picked up early experience with cattle and bucking stock until she was considered one of the best and most graceful child riders in that part of the country—a section where good child riders are a dime a dozen.

In 1937, Col. Johnson retired from the rodeo business and Everett Colborn stepped into his place. He bought out Col. Johnson's entire rodeo stock and equipment for something like a quarter of a million dollars, formed the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation and became Managing Director of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden.

To supply stock for the rodeo corporation, the Lightning C, at Dublin, Texas, was purchased and became the world's largest ranch devoted entirely to the raising of rodeo stock.

Stern Training

Here began Rosemary's sternest training. The ranch dealt with man-killing broncs and with vicious man-hating Brahma bulls and steers. Working these animals was very different from handling ordinary cattle. It was quite a trick just to get back to the ranch in one piece.

Rosemary continued her schooling at the town of Dublin, fifteen miles away. To make time she was forced to use a car instead, as she would have preferred, riding on her horse. To this day she prefers a saddle to the cushions of a horseless carriage.

A Star Performer

Each fall she came with her father and mother to the Madison Square Garden for the big rodeo. At the age of fourteen she began to ride in the quadrille.

She had learned the dance in Texas where she had filled in at local rodeos when they were short a girl. And because of her ingrained, wonderful sense of horsemanship, she picked it up easily and expertly. No one remembers her ever turning in a bad performance in anything where there was horseback riding to be done.

Of course, her schooling is one of her most important assets. She is quick and bright at her studies. In high school she won the Interscholastic League Championship in Spelling one year, the Dramatic Contest another and the Mathematics Contest the third.

Riding for Real

During the war, the Lightning C was drained of cowboys as were all the other ranches. With the men off to the Armed Forces, it was up to the girls to pitch in and do the work. Rosemary's riding stopped being for fun and started to be for real. She made a regular hand on the ranch, working long hard hours and sharing the same risks and toil as the regular cowboys had done.

She rode in to separate bucking horses from vicious bulls or longhorn steers, to cut out any one animal, take it away from the herd and guide it into a desired corral—all the hard, dangerous duties which are comparable only to a lion tamer's work in the circus. For these animals are bad. And to be bucked off, or fall off among a bunch of Brahma bulls is curtains, for those critters have no use for mankind and love to show it—with horns.

Expert at Swimming

For relaxation, Rosemary went in for swimming and dancing. She is an expert swimmer, master of many and varied strokes, and a fearless diver, jumping from considerable heights with unfailing grace.

She is popular at dances because of her beauty and her innate grace and poise. A personal modesty makes her so natural and unassuming that few can resist her charm.

Several years ago the big New York rodeo initiated the system of sending scouts all over the country to find glamor girls for the Madison Square show. These girls were to be beautiful and charming and of course had to be expert riders. The scouts covered all the local rodeos from Texas to Montana and soon it became a signal honor for a local girl to be invited to come to New York.

Rosemary worked with these scouts. From her knowledge of the West she could often give them tips as to where a pretty and expert ranch girl might be found.

Sometimes when the scouts found it hard to decide between two girls they appealed to Rosemary and they were tickled with the

cool, professional opinion, untinged by bias which she always offered.

An Unerring Eye

Pretty soon they were calling her the female Earl Carroll, the girl with the unerring eye for beauty and were relying more and more upon her judgment in the matter of selecting rangeland glamour beauties.

All this time Rosemary had no thought of being one of the Ranch Glamour Girls herself. The scouts did, though. Since she was fifteen they had been urging her to accept and ride with the others. She always refused. She felt, with an unusual sense of tact, that too many girls would feel it unfair.

As daughter of the director she was in a position where she could not accept even if she honestly had earned it because it would look as though it was her father's influence which prompted it.

The one thing she could not resist was any invitation to ride. So every year she has ridden in the Grand Entry and in the horseback quadrille where there would be no question about her holding her own as an expert rider. And always she has received fulsome admiration, plus a shower of invitations to the fetes in honor of the Ranch Girls, the real glamor girls of the rodeo.

Majoring in Fine Arts

Rosemary missed the Madison Square Garden show last fall because she had enrolled in the John Tarleton College at Stephenville, Texas. She is majoring in fine arts. The big rodeo comes just at the peak of the fall term and Rosemary felt she should not take so much time out from her studies.

The college is close enough to the home ranch, however, for her to get home weekends and she keeps up her riding with her dad, for there is always plenty of riding work to do around a ranch.

Her one recent rodeo was the one at Fort Worth in March. By cramming her school work she was able to get leave to attend and had herself a wonderful time riding in the Grand Entry, the horseback quadrille, and dancing in the square dance of Gene Autry's Cavalcade of Pioneers. Everyone who saw her had a wonderful time, too.

America is full of wonderful girls and the West is full of lovely and accomplished ranch girls who can ride, rope, shoot, swim, dance and cook. But when it comes to making a choice, Rosemary Colborn goes right up near the top of the list!

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NEXT ISSUE

FOGHORN CLANCY

Introduces Charming

PATSY RODGERS

of the Great Virginia Ranch of Alberta, Canada!

●

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

Now, thought Jinny, she could get right out of the picture since Leon had his Ada back

A Fascinating Novelet

Courageous Gal

By THELMA KNOLES

Jinny Pennington proves that the true pioneer spirit can live in the heart of an Eastern girl when she faces plenty of real gunsmoke danger on her path to the realization of her romance!

CHAPTER I

Ladies' Choice

EVERY cowboy in the crowded old ballroom that opened off the Diamond Palace was eagerly begging for a dance with Jinny Pennington. Graceful as a golden chiffon butterfly she whirled from one pair of arms to another until the high-piled black curls danced on her head and her indigo blue eyes were aglow.

"Ladies' Choice!" called the announcer. "Step right up, gals, and claim your man!"

Jinny evaded the eager eyes seeking hers. She turned and surveyed the room. Her glance fell on a tall cowboy who had just come in. He stood inside the door, his dark head topping those around him. Suddenly, looking toward her, he smiled as though he had glimpsed the gold at the end of the rainbow.

His smile was so unexpectedly warm and compelling even across the room that Jinny

found herself walking toward him. Around her she heard rustlings and self-conscious laughter as the other girls sought their partners.

She stood before the tall cowboy. His grin wavered as he looked down at her. He appeared to be surprised and embarrassed.

"Ladies Choice!" Jinny reminded him gaily, feeling the color rise in her cheeks. There was something undeniably exciting about this direct approach, she decided.

The cowboy flung a startled glance over his shoulder as though she might be speaking to someone behind him. Jinny laid her hand on his arm and smiled reassuringly. She had already discovered that underneath their breezy impudence most of the Western men were boyishly shy.

A girl brushed by Jinny.

"This is *our* dance, isn't it, Leon?" she asked, and tucked her hand possessively through the cowboy's free arm.

Jinny turned surprised eyes on the tall, blond daughter of Cactus Valley's sheriff. Her cheeks flamed as she met the other girl's frankly hostile stare. Without realizing what she was doing, Jinny's fingers closed tightly on the cowboy's arm.

Embarrassment struck her dumb as she understood that he hadn't been directing that radiant smile at her, but at Ada Nary. Through a blur of confusion she heard the music begin, felt the swish of dancers passing them.

"Reckon Miss Jinny outrun you, Ada," came a cheerful drawl at Jinny's shoulder. "She got here first fair and square so you'd better dance with me."

"Curley Pyatt, you stay out of this!" Ada cried angrily, but the waddy swung her away.

JINNY dropped the cowboy's arm as though his plaid flannel shirt sleeve burned her fingers.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammered, and turned to flee.

She was caught back in a tight embrace.

"You chose me," said the tall cowboy Ada had called Leon. "We'll dance."

He held her light and firmly, whirled her into the thickening crowd. Jinny was sharply aware of his arm around her waist, his hand holding hers. She felt the same magic warmth, the vital attraction that had drawn her to him across the crowded hall. But this was madness. He was only a strange cowboy. And he had been smiling at another girl.

She stole a glance upward and saw that his eyes were as gray-green as the sage that crowded right into the streets of Mescal. He caught her looking up at him, and a grin touched his lips, but his eyes were not laughing. They were bright and intent. They were looking straight into her heart.

His expression changed and she thought in dismay that he sensed her confusion. His arm tightened and the blood rushed to her face and then away, leaving her pale. He noticed that, too. His eyes darkened. He looked angry, rebellious.

"He's disappointed," Jinny thought, hurt beyond all reason for such a trifling matter.

Of all the men in that dance hall she had unerringly chosen the one who preferred to dance with another girl. Well, maybe not *every* man had been begging her for dances, but it had certainly seemed that way.

She stumbled, her slipper coming up against his polished boot.

"L-let's stop," she suggested, when his dark brows lifted and he looked down at her inquiringly. "It's so hot in here."

Instead of escorting her to the line of chairs against the wall he swung her through the open door and out into the sage-scented spring night. He guided her toward the buggies tied behind the building. Jinny found herself hurried along, her slippers twinkling beside his black boots. Back in the hall the music twanged away with muted gaiety.

"Better sit out here and rest a bit," the cowboy said gravely, and lifted her up onto the high seat of a rig. He stepped up beside her and drew out cigarette makings. "Crowd in there's kind of rough for a little thing like you." He glanced sideward at Jinny whose topmost curl barely reached his wide shoulder. "Had a school teacher out here couple of years back who fainted while I was dancin' with her. Scared the livin' daylights out of me."

"I never faint," Jinny declared.

He shook his head, looking up at the stars.

"She was a little bit of a thing, too," he mused. "No bigger than a doll. Country like to have killed her."

"I love it out here," Jinny declared firmly. "I'd like to live in the West all my life."

Leon laughed. Jinny sat straighter. Her shoulder brushed his and she felt a wave of excitement sweep through her.

"I really mean it," she said. "I love everything about this country. I hate to go back to New York."

She looked out across the rolling miles of sage and cholla and greasewood, gleaming silver in the moonlight. She drew in a deep breath of the dry, perfumed desert air.

"I'd do most anything to have a home here," she said simply, speaking from her very soul.

"You're plumb loco," was the cowboy's prompt response. "You're just dazzled by the things the dudes always rave about. The sunsets and cactus and purple mountains." His tone was edged with mockery. "We likewise have droughts and sidewinders—two-legged ones more'n the other kind—and years of hard, grubbing work."

"That wouldn't worry me," Jinny insisted.

He reached over and picked up one of her hands. It lay like a white flower on his wide, brown palm.

"Hands have to be more than ornaments out here." His voice turned hard. "You don't belong here, Miss Pennington. This is no place for women like you."

SHE felt as though he had slapped her. She jerked her hand from his. Her fingers tingled warmly as though they had come in contact with a powerful current. She looked up into the cowboy's unrelenting eyes and anger swept through her in a hot wave of protest.

"What do you know about women like me?" she demanded.

"My brother married that school teacher," he replied evenly. "She was little and pretty as a doll. And about as much good on a ranch. After the novelty wore off she made his life a living torment, wanting to get out of here." He paused and drew hard on his cigarette. "When they had a baby my brother had to give in. He sold out and went to Chicago." His voice was bitter. "He's peddling stocks and bonds now. When I saw him last Christmas he was fat and pasty-faced and drank too much."

There was a silence. Jinny felt the cowboy stir beside her. She didn't want to go in yet, to leave things this way between them.

"And so you're never going to marry?" she said quickly.

"Sure," he replied promptly. "I aim to be married right away. Soon as I get back from the cattle drive. But the girl I'll marry belongs to this country. She was born and grew up here. She can ride and rope good as any man. She'd help her husband build up from a two-bit spread or queen it over a big place." He turned and looked suddenly at the girl beside him. "And she's pretty enough to—well, she's plumb beautiful."

Jinny felt a kindling fire running through her veins, blazing through her blood. What, she wondered through this surge of feeling that had nothing to do with maidenly reserve, had this range-bred Amazon that she didn't?

Leon's intent gaze was still on her face, as though he couldn't look away. Jinny felt a thrill shoot through her. She leaned toward him ever so slightly. The silvery moonlight lost itself in the midnight blue depths of her eyes. Her parted lips were red and soft, and a heady fragrance blew from her silken black curls.

The cowboy flipped his cigarette over the side of the rig.

"Don't look at an hombre that way," he warned her.

Jinny's lips parted in a tantalizing smile. She couldn't have told why she was acting as she did. It was as instinctive as her response to his smile earlier in the evening, when she had made her way straight to him.

He bent toward her, caught her up against him. His arms were around her. She was held close in that powerful, irresistible current of magnetism. She was wrapped in the magic and warmth that she had known on the dance floor, and when he had picked up her hand. Only now that sensation was all through her, was a part of her.

Then his lips crushed down on hers and she was out of the world, into a dream of enchantment.

Leon lifted his head. Jinny looked up into his eyes, so close, lost herself in the dark mystery of their glowing depths. His arms tightened, his head bent again, and she felt herself go still and tense, waiting suspended in a shining net of expectancy for his lips to claim hers again.

He caught his breath and his mouth tightened. She could feel the rigidness in his arms around her. Then, quickly and deftly, he put her away from him. He stepped down from the rig, reached up and lifted her down before he spoke.

"Another souvenir to take back home, Miss Pennington," he said harshly.

Souvenir! Jinny bit hard on her quivering lip. She felt stunned and helpless, plummeted from the heights of ecstasy into cold loneliness. She put out her hand, unconsciously appealing.

"Go back where you belong before you play hob with some rancher's life," the cowboy said quietly. "And now, we'd better get back to that dance."

CHAPTER II
Broken Dreams

LEON and Jinny started away from the buggy. His hand was firm under her arm, or she would have stumbled. Silently, numbly, she moved along like a small golden ghost in the cold shower of moonlight. The warm, living heart of her had gone out to this self-possessed cowboy and he had promptly handed it back. But it would never be quite the same again.

"Clark!" called a man's deep voice, and a big figure loomed up from the shadows. "I'm leaving for Sonora and I wanted to speak to you."

"Sure, Sheriff," Leon replied. "Right here." When the officer came up to them, he explained, "Miss Pennington needed a breath of air."

"Having a good time?" the sheriff asked Jinny genially. "Reckon all Mescal turned out for you folks."

"It's a lovely dance," Jinny heard her own voice saying.

"Listen, Leon," the sheriff spoke rapidly. "Watch out for Cap Colter. He's here tonight, and I don't like the look in his ornery eyes. He hates your very insides, son."

"Sure," Leon agreed cheerfully. "Colter's tried every trick he knows, Sheriff, but he hasn't managed to get my ranch away from me yet."

"You're still planning on driving cattle north in the morning?" Sheriff Nary asked.

"Sweetest herd the Abilene market will see this spring," Leon assured him.

The sheriff grunted approval. "I'm glad you're hitting the trail. Maybe I can run Colter out of Mescal while you're gone and before there's blood shed over your spread." He bit a corner from a plug of tobacco with a snap of his teeth. "With his kind around, decent, law-abidin' ranchers won't bring their families and settle in Cactus Valley."

"Maybe my outfit will kind of encourage the settlers," Leon suggested. "Especially when I get my own family."

"I'm countin' on that," the sheriff replied. He started way. "Adios, folks." Then he turned to call back, "Ada's lookin' for you, Leon."

"We'll be there pronto," the cowboy said and, still holding Jinny's arm, headed for the dance hall.

Jinny's head was high and her lovely face calm when they stepped into the light. Her eyes were unusually dark and bright, but no one seemed to notice.

"Where on earth have you been, Virginia?" a handsome, fashionably dressed woman demanded, coming up to them.

"Mr. Clark's been telling me about—souvenirs, Aunt Liz," Jinny explained, her voice as light and gay as tinkling bells.

Liz Freeman was no relation, but she was Jinny's dearly loved guardian and godmother. Now Jinny turned to the big, white-haired man, Aunt Liz's father, who stood surveying the crowd like a king looking over his subjects.

"Mr. Abbot," she said vivaciously, "you haven't danced with me yet."

Tycoon Abbot looked at her from under his shaggy brows.

"Do you suppose those fiddlers can play a waltz?"

"I'll tell them, Mr. Abbot," Leon offered promptly, and strode through the crowd.

As if, thought Jinny, keeping her smile bright on her lips, he could hardly wait to get away from her side.

Waltzing sedately around with Mr. Abbot, she fought to get control of her emotions. She nodded over his massive shoulder to the friendly greetings from the citizens of Mescal who had given this dance in honor of Tycoon Abbot, his daughter Liz Freeman, and her ward, Virginia Pennington, all visitors from New York.

People everywhere respected Tycoon Abbot, Jinny thought, for he carried his Wall Street importance with him like a banner.

"Has your trip West been successful from a business standpoint?" she asked politely.

She never heard his reply, for her heart was taking a fluttering dive to her toes. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Leon Clark dancing with Ada Nary. And she saw now that Ada was tall and strong. And—yes, in a certain way she might be called beautiful, in a buxom, blond way.

And, thought Jinny disconsolately, Ada looked as though she could throw and tie a wild steer, all right. She was big enough.

LEON hugged Ada up to him as they passed Jinny. He smiled down at her tenderly.

"I'll build you the finest home in the valley when I get back from the drive, Ada," Jinny distinctly heard him say.

"I'll be waiting," Ada fairly cooed, "and I'll be planning the wedding."

Jinny closed her eyes. The room swam around her, a medley of colors. When she looked again Leon and Ada had waltzed out of her sight. . . .

Tycoon Abbot's party stayed on two weeks longer at the ranch of Mescal's leading citizen, some miles out of town. Jinny knew that Tycoon was generously helping the people of Cactus Valley to establish their first court of law in Mescal. He had organized a special election in which they elected a judge, and shortly after that he had sent for a lawyer.

When he mentioned Cap Colter she recalled Sheriff Nary's warning to Leon Clark the night of the dance. She asked Tycoon Abbot who Cap Colter was.

"A typical frontiersman," Tycoon explained. "He's had a hand in everything in this country. Mining. Gambling. Ranching." He chuckled. "Perhaps a bit of rustling in his time. That's the way most of the big men out here got their start. It's a cutthroat game in a raw new country like this."

"Colter's probably done no worse than you and your friends on some of your stock market deals, Father," remarked Liz, looking up from her packing. "If you ask me, I'd say you were both pirates under your skin and heaven help anyone who had what you wanted—be it mining claim, a ranch, or a block of stock."

Tycoon laughed mightily as though his daughter had paid him a compliment.

Jinny's red lips drooped as she gazed longingly out the window. No need for her to ask about Leon Clark. For she already knew that he had set out on his scheduled cattle drive the morning after the dance. Also that Ada Nary proudly had displayed an engagement ring before the dance was over that evening.

"The desert air has been so good for your hay fever, Aunt Liz, don't you think we'd better stay out here longer?" Jinny asked hopefully. "Maybe all summer?"

"No, darling," Liz replied. "We'll go home with Father. Though I'm certainly glad we made the trip." She smiled archly at Jinny. "Besides, my precious nephew is probably counting the days till you get back home."

With a twinge of guilt Jinny thought of Doug Abbot—big and fair and handsome. And always adoring her. Doug was Tycoon Abbot's grandson and Aunt Liz's nephew, and their friends accepted it as a matter of course that some day Jinny would agree to marry Doug. . . .

All predictions proved correct, for when Jinny Pennington returned to Mescal three months later it was with Aunt Liz and Doug Abbot, and Doug's huge solitaire blazed on her engagement finger.

The stage swung up the dusty street just past noon and stopped with a flourish. The driver opened the door.

"You folks can get lunch at the Diamond Palace across the street," he announced.

"The Diamond Palace!" Jinny cried delightedly. "Oh, Aunt Liz, we're here again! Doug, you're sure to love it, too."

Her eyes were starry with excitement as she glanced around at the sleepy, dreary little town, drowsing under the hot summer sunshine. She ignored Doug's disgusted comments as they plodded through ankle-deep dust. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could take away that wonderful, blessed feeling of homecoming.

They pushed open the batwing doors of the saloon and stood blinking in the semi-gloom.

"I see Sam Bacon brung the stage in on time," remarked the bartender. He raised his voice. "Tables over yonder in the corner, folks. Just make yourselves to home and we'll rustle up some grub."

Some of the eager excitement died out of Jinny's eyes as she noted the thickly lined bar. She had forgotten that. Well, maybe, she thought resolutely, since they were so near their journey's end Doug wouldn't just this once spend every minute of their stopover drinking. Maybe he would let her show him some of the real beauty of the West for which she had hungered.

"I do hope," Aunt Liz remarked, majestically ignoring the curious stares from the customers who'd turned to regard them, "that we can have something to eat besides that eternal chili."

Doug smiled unpleasantly. "We'd better fortify ourselves with a drink."

"Please, Doug," Jinny pleaded, "don't start that."

Doug's heavy, fair face looked sulky.

"Why not?" he demanded. "What else is there to do? Besides, when did you turn prude, Virginia Pennington? That's not the effect of the wide-open spaces on me. They make me thirsty."

JINNY blinked back the tears that stung her eyelids. But she couldn't keep the resentment and hurt out of her face as she looked at Doug. Then she fought down her disappointment.

"Just think, Doug," she said brightly. "We'll actually be at your ranch tonight. Aren't you excited?"

"Over that blasted cattle ranch Grandfather must have won in a poker game?" Doug slammed down his cigarette case. "They tell me that the market for beef is so poor this year that a sale wouldn't even pay for the auctioneer."

"Oh, you can't sell it!" Jinny protested, as she did every time the subject came up.

Not when all her vague, rainbow dreams of a home in the West had so miraculously taken firm foundation in a real ranch in Cactus Valley.

"You know very well that the only reason I let you drag me out here," Doug said crossly, "was to see the manager of the place, that Colter. And to make the best possible arrangements for getting rid of the ranch."

The bartender brought thick roast beef sandwiches and coffee, and they ate in silence.

One of the men at the bar said something in an audible murmur. Jinny caught a reference to black curls and big blue eyes, accompanied by an admiring glance in her direction. The cowboy who had spoken leaned over to nudge one of his companions who was hunched over the bar, his back squarely to the room.

"Leave him be," said another sharply.

Jinny felt a thrill of excitement as she recognized "Curley" Pyatt, the waddy who had danced Ladies' Choice with Ada Nary at that never-to-be-forgotten dance. Surely Curley must have recognized her by now. She waited, with a smile of welcome on her lips.

Curley never glanced her way.

"Leon ain't interested in women any more," he declared firmly. "Not at all. Besides, she ain't his type."

Leon! Jinny dropped her heavy spoon with a clatter. Her heart was thudding and she groped blindly for the spoon, her eyes fixed on the man at the bar. It *was* Leon! She could never mistake that wide spread of shoulders when he straightened. His voice lashed out, low and furious, carrying clearly.

"Will you boys get away from me to do your gossipin'? Go on. Vamoose! Leave me alone. I'll ride out to camp later."

At that Curley and some half-dozen cowboys finished their drinks hurriedly and left. Jinny dropped her puzzled, hurt eyes to her plate when they filed by the table without a glance of recognition for her. Well, maybe, she thought desolately, it was the hat and veil she was wearing, and the fact that their arrival in Mescal was totally unannounced.

She glanced again toward the bar and saw that Leon sat there alone. All the other big-hatted, levi-clad customers had drifted away as though respecting his angry desire for solitude. He hunched farther over his glass. Jinny stared at him in growing wonder and sickening dismay.

This was so different from the picture of Leon that she had carried in her heart for the past three months that she was thrown into confusion.

"Do I drink alone?" Doug asked petulantly.

Jinny's shock and bewilderment concentrated into her irritation and disappointment in her fiancé.

"Doug," she said accusingly, "all you've been interested in since we left home was how soon we'd reach the next bar. Is that all this trip, all the West, means to you?"

"Best part of it," Doug replied indifferently. "What'd you expect? Handsome cowboys always dashing around on horseback, showing off for you?" He laughed cynically. "Take a look at that specimen at the bar. He's a typical cowboy for you."

He spoke loudly, and Leon turned slowly around. With one hand he still held a glass, with the other he pushed a high-peaked Stetson back on his head. He surveyed them with narrowed, smoky gray eyes.

"Howdy, stranger," he offered coolly. "Take a good look."

There was no recognition in his voice or face.

CHAPTER III
Exit One Romance

JINNY gasped. Leon had a savage expression as he continued to stare at

them. His forehead was streaked with dust and there was an ugly swelling above one temple. Jinny shuddered and the cowboy grinned. The grin didn't reach his unfriendly eyes.

"Have a drink, pardner?" He gestured toward Doug.

A patronizing smile lifted the corners of Doug's lips. Jinny could almost hear him bragging about this little incident to the members of his club at home.

"Don't mind if I do, cowboy," he declared, and shot a glance of petty satisfaction toward the white-faced girl. "When in the West, Jinny darling," he said mockingly, pushing his chair back, "do as the Westerners do. And, my pet, it was *your* idea to come out to this hole."

He joined Leon at the bar. Jinny looked down at the table, staring blindly at the thick china. Aunt Liz set her coffee cup down.

"I believe I'll take a look at the town while we're waiting for the stage to leave," she remarked. "Coming, Jinny?"

"You go, Aunt Liz," Jinny replied. "I'll wait for Doug."

She sat alone at the table, her curly black head held stiffly erect. She crumbled a piece of bread and pushed the crumbs into a pile while the two men at the bar sipped their drinks.

Leon suddenly slapped his glass down on the bar and got to his feet. Jinny's wide purple-dark eyes followed him as he wavered uncertainly toward the door. As he came even with her she caught her breath and waited, every nerve tense. But the cowboy's glazed eyes looked beyond her as though she weren't there. As though he had never seen her before. As though he had never caught her in his arms and kissed her while the glowing stars spun down around them.

Jinny swallowed a sob that threatened to strangle her. She hated him. She was sorry she had come back here. She had been foolishly building dreams about a man who never existed. Tensely she waited for the sound of the batwing doors creaking to after Leon Clark's exit. The sound didn't come and she finally turned. The cowboy stood swaying at the door, gripping the sides of the frame in a desperate effort to keep on his feet.

As she stared he plunged through the swinging doors and disappeared. Exit one beautiful, romantic dream, Jinny thought scornfully. Something inside her wept bitter, scalding tears of disillusionment.

She looked back at her fiancé. When in the West do as the Westerners do, Doug had said. Now he ordered another drink.

Abruptly Jinny stood up. She would wait outside in the stage-coach. Sobs rose in her throat as she pushed open the doors. The bright sunlight hit her like a slap across the eyes. She took a deep breath, lifted her chin and walked toward the stage which was waiting with a fresh team.

The driver, Sam Bacon, came up.

"We'll be ready to leave in just a little bit, miss," he said pleasantly.

"I'll wait in the coach," Jinny told him. "The others will be along shortly."

Sam opened the door for her. She had one foot on the step when she drew back.

"Oh!" she cried. "There's someone—a man—in there!"

Then she saw that it was Leon Clark who was slumped down in the corner, his eyes closed.

The driver peered over Jinny's shoulder.

"What ornery, low-down—" he began and then stopped abruptly. He looked more closely. "Leon Clark!" he exclaimed. He leaned past Jinny, touched the unconscious cowboy's shoulder. "Leon, hey!"

His voice dropped away. He withdrew from the coach, glanced sharply around. He stiffened as he noted two men strolling across the street, and stood there undecided what to do.

The sun beat down on Jinny. All the weariness and hurt and disappointment that had been gathering in her seemed to come to a head.

"For goodness sake, get that—that man out of there," she cried, "so I can get out of this sun!"

Sam looked down at her. "Listen, ma'am," he said rapidly, in a low tone, "you go on back inside and wait. I'll take this cowboy to his friends and be back here ready to load up quick as a wink."

JINNY had no intention of returning to the Diamond Palace. There was no place else to wait out of the dust and heat.

"You can help that—that oaf back into the saloon," she insisted stubbornly. "I'm getting into this coach." She put her foot on the step. "Take him out on the other side."

The driver stood still, his hand on the door. He looked across the street to where another man had joined the two strollers. All three

leaned in the doorway of a butcher shop and rolled cigarettes.

Something like a bitten-off curse sounded above Jimmy's head. She turned in surprise to look up at the stage driver.

"Please, ma'am," he pleaded in a low, urgent voice, "get out of the way. Let me close the door."

"Why," Jinny demanded stubbornly, "must I be inconvenienced for—" She broke off in amazement. "Why, what on earth are you doing?"

It was already done. With a groan of desperation Sam Bacon slipped his hands under her elbows and lifted her neatly into the coach. He slammed the door shut and leaped up to the hight seat in front, slapped the reins on the horses' backs.

The grinding of the wheels, the clattering and creaking shut off Jinny's cry of protest. The coach lurched ahead and she barely managed to keep from being flung to the floor. The limp figure of the cowboy slumped down in the corner was thrown forward. Jinny caught his shoulders just in time to save his head from being banged violentiy against the opposite seat.

She braced her feet and held the tousled dark head in her lap. Leon's hat was on the floor. His long legs were doubled up and his wide shoulders were heavy on the girl's knees. She moved his head to a more comfortable position and steadied it with one hand.

She caught a glimpse of ocotillo and the tall spikes of yucca careening by. They were out of Mescal. The maniac driver was urging the pounding horses around a sharp curve that shirted a looming bluff.

Around the bluff their mad speed slackened. Jinny drew a panting breath of relief. Leon gave a faint moan and moved his head restlessly.

Jinny looked down into his face, feeling a warm rush of unwilling pity. He looked deceptively young and helpless, with his lashes lying long as a girl's on his cheek. He was pale under the deep suntan, and she felt a prick of anxiety. Automatically she smoothed the short, tumbled dark hair from his forehead, and her fingers moved tenderly over the ugly swelling on his temple.

The stage slowed. The driver leaned out and called:

"You all right, miss?"

Jinny hastily lifted Leon's head, pushed him down on the seat, and slid out of the way. She had barely accomplished this when the driver pulled the panting horses to a halt, leaped down to the road and came to the side of the coach. His anxious eyes sought the unconscious cowboy.

"I had to get him out of Mescal, pronto, ma'am," he explained, mopping his face with his bandanna. "Them gunnies of Colter's have been after him ever since he got back to town yesterday. In the shape he's in, ma'am, they'd have sent him to Boot Hill before sundown."

"Just because—because he's intoxicated?" Jinny asked.

"No, ma'am," the driver said firmly. "Leon's not drunk. Leon Clark don't get drunk. Colter's men must of slipped knockout drops into his whisky in the bar and aimed to finish him off later when he wouldn't be able to protect himself. Leon felt something wrong. He figured I'd help him. That's why—" Suddenly he whirled away from the side of the stage. "Stay down, ma'am!" he ordered sharply.

Jinny heard him through a thunder of hoofbeats sweeping around the coach. There was a shattering blast of gunfire and she crouched on the floor and covered her ears. Dimly she heard Sam Bacon cursing as he brought the horses under control.

"Head for town, Bacon!" a man's hard voice barked through the noise. "We ain't got nothin' against you."

"But—" Sam began to protest.

"Vamoose!" bellowed the voice. "It's Clark we're after. Hit the trail, you!"

"Help—me—get—my gun," came a shaky whisper in Jinny's ear. Leon was fumbling desperately at the holster he wore, shaking his head as though to clear his vision.

Jinny drew a quick, gasping breath and slid the heavy pistol from the leather case. He grasped it and pulled himself to his knees, turned to rest the gun on the window frame. Jinny saw that he wore another gun and lifted it from its holster and, holding it with both hands, she pointed it out the other window.

THROUGH a fog of dust she caught a glimpse of a man swinging down from saddle, saw the outline of his shoulder and the bright bandanna that hid his face. Then she heard the hard, rasping voice again.

"We'll get rid of this hombre, pronto!"

The bandanna loomed at the window. Jinny closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and

pulled the trigger. Through the deafening blast she heard a shot from the other side of the coach. Then another. There was a roar of startled oaths and shouts from outside. Then the welcome clatter of hoofs churning the dust, the receding pound of galloping horses.

Leon thrust his gun back into its holster. He rubbed his hand hard across his forehead. Then he turned and looked full at Jinny, who had fallen back on the seat and was regarding the pistol in her hand with dilated eyes.

"Holy—jumping—lizards!" he exclaimed weakly. "How'd *you* get here?"

Jinny dropped the pistol with a shudder. She looked back at him and some of the color returned to her face.

"I am the one who b-belongs on this stage," she declared, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

"You—" He broke off. He closed his eyes for an instant. Then he seemed to pull himself together. "Those lobos will be coming back," he said. His face was as hard as a mask of bronze and his eyes metallic. "We'd better be moving." He glanced out the window. "But not down the road. There's a prospector's cabin up the arroyo a way. We can hide out there for right now."

He swung out of the coach. Jinny noticed with a stab of apprehension that he had to hold to the side of it to steady himself. He managed to get up to the driver's seat, however, and his voice was firm and sure as he spoke to the team, turning the coach out of the road and into the sandy bed of the dry wash.

Jinny drew a long, gasping breath and buried her face in her hands. Sam Bacon's explanation whirled through her mind. Colter's gunnies. . . Knockout drops. . . Boot Hill. She though of Leon, unconscious, drugged, his lashes lying long on his cheeks and his whole body lax and helpless. She didn't care, she thought fiercely, if she had shot that horrible gunman with the bandanna. She hoped she had.

A warm tide of sympathy and anxiety for the gray-eyed cowboy swept through her, leaving her weak and trembling yet with a new feeling of protective strength.

The coach rattled and squeaked along the arroyo which presently turned sharply into the hills, taking them out of sight of the road. Jinny drew a sharp breath of relief. The going got rougher and she saw that they were headed across an open stretch of mesa. They lurched along over clumps of buffalo grass and scraped between stands of mesquite. She had to hold tight to the seat to keep from being banged all over the coach.

When at last they stopped it was in front of a weather-beaten little frame shack that blended into the rocky, bare brown hill that backed it. Jinny pushed open the door of the coach and stepped out.

"The six-shooter," Leon reminded her.

At the tenseness in his face and voice she felt her own heart leap with new terror. She snatched the pistol from the floor of the coach as though her very life depended on having it in her hand. Holding the gun, she turned swiftly. Her long skirt caught on the step of the coach and she stumbled. She caught her balance immediately, but the pistol flew from her fingers.

It struck a ledge of stone with a clatter that was lost in a blast of gunfire. Jinny's terrified scream was muffled against Leon's flannel-clad shoulder. She clung to him, trembling. His arms went around her, holding her close. When the wild pounding of her heart quieted a bit she heard him speaking, his voice quiet and reassuring.

"The gun went off when it hit the rocks. Don't be scared. There's no one here but us." There was a wry note in his voice that brought her back to her senses. "Even the horses took to their heels."

She reluctantly lifted her head from his shoulder. Slowly she turned in his arms.

"Oh!" she cried inadequately. They stood silent, watching the clattering stage rocking and lurching along, back across the mesa, drawn by the terrified runaway horses.

"Reckon there's nobody home here," Leon remarked. "Old Naco Tom must be out in the hills."

Suddenly Jinny was conscious of his arms still around her. Of the hard beat of his heart that seemed to drum through her own body. Of her tingling awareness of his nearness. She willed herself to step away from him, but she could not. She was held by the force of that magnetic current that always drew her to him.

It was Leon who broke the spell. His arms dropped away from her.

"Maybe we'd better go inside while we sort of get our bearings."

"Certainly," Jinny replied evenly.

He shot her a glance of admiration, and she gritted her teeth and clenched her hands

in the folds of her skirt to stop her absurd trembling.

CHAPTER IV
Cabin in the Hills

THE little cabin was neat and bare. It contained one bunk, two straight chairs, a small table, and a square black range. There was a pile of chunky mesquite roots in the woodbox, and canned tomatoes, coffee, canned beans, and dried prunes on a shelf over the stove.

Leon lowered his long frame onto a chair. He braced his elbow on the table and dropped his head into his hands.

"If this isn't one heck of a note!" he groaned. "Up to my neck in trouble already, and now"—he wound up desperately—"Naco Tom'll likely be gone for weeks."

Jinny dropped onto the other chair. Color scorched her cheeks.

"If you're worried because of me," she informed him, "I'm sure you won't be bothered long. Doug will get us out of this, right away."

Leon lifted his face from his hands. A bitter smile stretched his lips across his teeth. The angry rebellion, the utter hopelessness that showed in that smile drove Jinny into a fury of hurt and resentment.

"Perhaps you're afraid this might interfere with your wedding plans," she said with blazing eyes.

"Wedding plans?" he echoed, and a chill, forbidding expression replaced the unpleasant smile. "What are you talking about?"

"You told me," Jimmy reminded him, her breath coming so fast that the bodice of her soft dress rose sharply, "that you intended to be married as soon as you returned from your cattle drive. Well, you seem to be back."

He jerked his glance away from hers, but not before she saw the swift darkening of the gray-green eyes, like a thundercloud shadowing the desert.

"I learned yesterday just how an hombre stands with a girl when he's been cleaned out of everything," he said savagely. "There aren't any wedding plans."

Jinny swiftly lowered her lashes. Her thoughts flew around in brightening circles. None of this made sense, but one fact was shining clear. Leon Clark had no wedding plans. He was not marrying Ada Nary.

Now he spoke again, his voice hard and cold.

"Who's the big blond gent we left back in the Diamond Palace? Something about him seems familiar, yet I'd swear I'd never seen him before."

"That was Doug Abbot," Jinny replied. "My fiancé!"

The glow went out of her eyes and out of her heart. She was thinking of what Leon had just said about how an hombre stood with a girl when he had been cleaned out of everything. Doug had lost practically everything. That fact, more than anything else, sealed her engagement to him.

"Abbot!" Leon was exclaiming sharply. "Tycoon Abbot's son?"

"Grandson," Jinny corrected through the tightness gathering in her throat. "Mr. Abbot died quite suddenly last month and Doug inherited a cattle ranch from him. We—he came out here to look it over."

"You—don't—say," Leon drawled. "Inherited a cattle ranch."

He fumbled a sack of tobacco out of his shirt pocket. His glance dropped to the diamond ring that blazed and winked on Jinny's finger.

"So you really meant it back there at that dance when you said you'd do most anything to have a home here?"

"What do you mean?" Jinny asked through dry lips.

"I saw you snuggling up to that blasted old Wall Street bandit that night," Leon informed her. "Maybe you hinted that you'd sort of like to have Rancho Reata for a wedding present if you married his grandson?"

He sounded tired and beaten.

"Rancho Reata?" Jinny echoed blankly. "Why, that *is* the name of the ranch Mr. Abbot bought while he was here. That's where we were—are—going from Mescal."

"Bought?" Leon laughed harshly. "Sister, don't act so blamed innocent. Put two sidewinders like Cap Colter and Tycoon Abbot together and they don't have to buy what they want." He suddenly seemed to lose all patience with her wide-eyed amazement. "Why do you suppose they passed out free drinks till they got all the riffraff in Cactus Valley gathered in the Diamond Palace, pulled an election, and run in Doc Crane, the slickest lobo in Mescal, as judge?"

JINNY'S eyes began to spark fire.

"Mr. Abbot stayed at Mescal longer than he planned, just to help the town get a court and a judge," she said warmly. "He even sent for a lawyer to help them when they tried their first case."

"Lady," said Leon Clark with deadly softness, "that first case in Cactus Valley was a frameup to swipe my spread, Rancho Reata, while I was away."

Jinny moistened her lips. "If—if taking your ranch was a frameup," she suggested, "why couldn't you prove it in court?"

"I tried that this morning," Leon replied dryly. "On my way to see Doc Crane I was jumped by two of Colter's gunnies, and the papers I carried were stolen." His hand went up to touch the bruise on his forehead, and Jinny winced in sympathy. "Luckily I'd left the original of the old grant that gave my father title to the ranch in the safe at the stage station."

"Then what did you do?" Jinny asked, trying not to think of that fight that had taken place.

"I went on to Doc Crane's court, next to the Diamond Palace. I found Doc flanked by two of the toughest gun-totin' hombres I ever saw. They invited me out, pronto."

"From there," Jinny said in a low voice, "you must have gone into the Diamond Palace. You were there when the stage came in."

Leon nodded. "Colter's jaspers were there, too," he said grimly. "I made the mistake of thinking they were through with me and didn't notice when they doctored my drink."

Jinny took a deep breath and tried to be gallant about it.

"So Sam Bacon tried to get you away—and here we are," she said.

Leon scowled and she saw in dismay that he thought she was being flippant about the situation. Suddenly the cabin seemed very small, shutting her into a tiny space with this angry, bitter man whose gray-green eyes smoldered fire, whose tight, locked lips were unsmiling as he stared at her.

She found herself unwillingly remembering the cold, ruthless expression in Tycoon Abbot's eyes, remembering the tales of his high-handed manipulation of the stock market, and his own daughter's pronouncing him a conscienceless financial pirate.

Jinny dropped her face into her hands, her bonnet fell to the floor, and she let it lie there. Tears were crowding her eyes and she was trying desperately to keep them back.

"Yeah," came the cowboy's terse voice, "here we are, the two of us, and"—she glanced up to see his bleak gaze on her dainty pointed kid slippers—"it looks like we stay here till the sheriff and Sam pick up our trail and find us."

"*You* don't have to stay," Jinny managed to say in a choked, defiant voice.

He gave a short, bitter laugh, and in spite of herself Jinny felt her lips tremble and knew that her face showed the hurt she felt. The cowboy got to his feet in one lithe motion. He came around the little table, and his hands closed on her shoulders in a warm, hard grip.

"Don't you worry about all this," he said gently. "I aim to get my ranch back, legal or otherwise." His hands tightened on her shoulders as he stared down into the pansy-blue eyes. "You've been mighty quick on the trigger. I reckon you saved my ornery scalp by helping scare those gunnies off." His voice deepened. "And you're such a soft little thing."

Jinny felt a warm glow spreading through her. It rose to her eyes in soft radiance and trembled on her parted red lips.

"I'm sure that—that everything will be all right," she said. "When Doug understands about your ranch you'll get it back."

She broke off, for Leon had released her shoulders and stepped away. The gentleness had gone from his face and Jinny felt suddenly forlorn and frightened. She thought back about what she had just said and, remembering Doug, she herself felt bleak and chilled.

"Let's hope the sheriff shows up before dark," Leon said shortly, and walked over to the rusty old range. "Meantime we can do with some coffee."

No one had showed up by the time evening shadows had settled around the little cabin. Leon fastened the shutters on the one window, barred the door, and laid his two pistols within easy reach. He set a kerosene lamp on the table and lit it. Jinny looked at the soft yellow circle of the lamplight and involuntarily smiled.

LAMPLIGHT was a wonderful thing. Warm, bright—and intimate. As she gazed at the brave little flame her cheeks grew rosy and the light reflected in dancing golden stars in the shadowy depths of her eyes. She heard the quickened breathing of

the man across the table and swiftly glanced at him.

Instantly he looked away from her. She noticed how clear and strong his profile showed in the flickering light, the arched dark line of his brows, the chiseled strength of his mouth. She felt her own breathing quicken, and was sharply aware of all the little soft noises of the night, closing like a web around her. There was the sleepy purr of the fire in the range, a tentative rattle the wooden shutter at the window gave, and from far away outside the inquiring call of an owl.

"I reckon no one'll be coming this late," Leon finally broke the tense silence between them to say. "You'd better get some rest." He nodded toward the bunk.

Jinny tore off her shoes and lay down. She had no intention of going to sleep, but as she lay watching the wavering shadows on the raftered ceiling she felt herself sinking into drowsiness. She had a wonderful sense of being safe and protected, of being cherished. Which was all ridiculous, for she knew just how Leon Clark looked sitting at the little table, his arms folded rigidly on his wide chest, and his face set in grim, desperate hardness. . . .

She awoke to the fragrance of steaming coffee and the brilliance of the sunshine pouring through the open door. The cabin was empty, and she had a swift fear that Leon was gone. The sight of the empty woodbox reassured her. He must have gone out after firewood.

There was a pitcher of water beside the wash basin on the bench outside the door. She splashed it on her face and hands, gasping at its icy coldness, and emerging pink as a rose. She combed out her curls with her fingers, smoothed her rumpled dress, and had started to go back into the cabin when the sound of rapidly approaching hoofbeats stopped her.

Across the tiny mesa came a buggy, swaying along at a good rate. Jinny's heart plunged downward. Why couldn't they have waited just a little longer? Until after breakfast, anyway. She forced a smile to her lips and waited while Aunt Liz and Doug and a heavy-featured swarthy stranger stepped out of the buggy.

"Virginia Pennington!" Aunt Liz exclaimed. "We've been out of our minds with worry! When you disappeared in that stage and didn't come back we were frantic." She hugged Jinny to her. "Then when we learned that the sheriff was out of town, we hired a rig to take us to the ranch. Mr. Colter sent his men out right away and they came back with the news that the stage had come back to town empty. You can imagine how we felt, and it was too late then to do anything."

"I'm perfectly all right, Aunt Liz," Jinny assured her.

"Well," Aunt Liz went on, her eyes snapping with indignation, "where is that cowboy? A joke's a joke, but this is going too far. Running off with you in that stage. And the driver playing right in with him."

"Yes," Doug broke in, "where *is* that fellow?" He sounded more angry than relieved at Jinny's safety. "You don't seem to have suffered from your adventure, Virginia. Looks like the joke may be on us after all, Aunt Liz."

Jinny stared at him, surprised at his tone. She began to explain about the masked men holding up the stage, about the gun going off accidentally and frightening the horses. An instinctive caution kept her from mentioning any names.

"A likely story," Doug broke in jeeringly. "There's more to it than that, I'll wager. You always were a madcap, Virginia." His voice sharpened. "There's something between you and that cowboy!" He caught the betraying expression that flashed in her eyes and said nastily, "Ten to one you met him when you were out here before. That's why you were so determined to come on this trip out West."

Jinny felt the scorching color flood her face and then recede. She couldn't remember having been so angry in her life. She opened her lips, closed them tight, and turned to the cabin door. Aunt Liz accompanied her.

"Hold on a minute, Abbot," came the voice of the stranger as Doug started to follow. "I want to speak to you about something."

"All right, Colter," Doug agreed.

CHAPTER V
A Queen for Rancho Reata

INSIDE the doorway, Jinny stopped abruptly. She felt the nerves along her backbone tingle warning. *Colter,* Doug had said.

She turned to see the men disappearing around the corner of the cabin. She flashed

a warning glance at Aunt Liz and moved noiselessly over to the open window, through which came the murmur of the men's voices.

"First chance I've had to see you alone," she heard the swarthy man saying. "I wanted to ask you about a letter that might have been in Tycoon Abbot's things when he died. You wouldn't be interested in it."

Doug's unpleasant laugh cut him off.

"Guess again, Colter. You think I don't understand why my grandfather kept that letter? It's a most interesting document, especially the remarks about a certain murder you and the new judge of Mescal were tangled up in some time ago. Well, I figured out the reason the old man let you run this place for him out here was because he held that letter over your head, Colter."

Jinny's heart pounded against her ribs. There *was* proof then of Cap Colter's duplicity and the falseness of the judge who had helped take Leon Clark's ranch away from him.

"All right, Abbot." Colter's low, hard voice was a deadly threat. "Hand that letter over, now. It's not in your baggage, so you must have it on you."

"Why, you—" Doug sputtered. There was a sharp edge of fear in his rising voice. "Take that gun out of my ribs!"

Jinny turned, glanced swiftly around. One of Leon's pistols still lay on the kitchen table. She sped across the room, snatched it up and hurried through the door.

Dimly she heard Aunt Liz's startled, "What on earth!" following her.

She hurried on. Hugging the wall of the cabin she followed it to the corner, eased around. Colter's back was to her. He was reaching forward with his left hand. There was a rustle of paper, and a rush of incoherent protest from Doug.

Then Jinny's voice rang out clearly.

"Put your hands up, you! I'll take that letter! "

The big man stepped back, swift as a cat.

"Drop that gun, you little fool!" he snapped.

"Drop *yours,* Colter," came a sharp command. "And reach, pronto!"

Jinny gasped. Leon Clark stood at the other corner of the cabin, his other pistol held lightly, surely, in his hand. There was the clink of metal on stone as Cap Colter's gun hit the ground.

"I been standing back of the cabin for some little time," Leon declared, coming forward, "listening to all that went on. I learned considerable."

Jinny felt the blood roaring in her ears. She caught Leon's lightning glance on her. Then he gave all his attention to Cap Colter. But he had heard, Jinny thought in an agony of embarrassment. He had heard what Doug blurted out in his stupid anger and resentment.

Through the blur of confusion and Aunt Liz's puzzled questions came the thunder of hoofbeats again. Two horsemen topped the mesa and a moment later the sheriff's voice rang out.

"Well, it appears like Sam and I are a mite late, Leon. I see you caught this sidewinder yourself." There was a squeak of leather and the thump of heavy boots hitting the ground. "The boys told me about those hombres jumping you yesterday morning, Leon, and I got on their trail while it was hot. I run down one of Colter's hired bushwhackers and before long he told me the whole thing to save his own skin."

He favored Jinny with a benevolent glance.

"Glad to see the little lady's all right." He stepped between Leon and Colter. "Funny thing, Colter, your old sidekick, Doc Crane, took a sudden notion to travel south. Reckon he's clear across the Border now. So we'll have to have another election in Mescal Valley, pronto."

Jinny turned and moved blindly toward the door of the cabin. Suddenly the sun was too dazzlingly bright, the voices of the men too loud and harsh. The quick turn of events seemed to reel around her.

She heard Leon saying something fervent about clearing those coyotes off his ranch now and the sheriff replying that he reckoned that the pack of them would be clean gone by the time they got there.

"Jinny." It was Doug who caught up with her, whose hand was hard on her arm. "No use in your going in there. We'll ride to town now."

She shook his hand away. "You knew about that letter," she said, suddenly feeling cool and sure of herself. "All the time, you knew that ranch had been illegally taken from Leon Clark while he was away."

"Don't be such a little fool," Doug said petulantly. "I'm sick of this whole mess. Who can say what's legal or illegal in this wild country? Let's get back where we belong."

"Go ahead."

JINNY jerked the diamond ring from her finger, thrust it into his hand.

"You come with me," Doug blustered.

His face was dark with anger. He caught her by the arm and started toward the buggy.

"Hold on, hombre." The steady voice that spoke so close at hand made Jinny sob with relief. "Let the lady go."

Doug released her and she turned her back to him, gathering her dignity and poise about her. She heard the sheriff speaking to Leon.

"Sam and I'll take Colter into town," he announced. "Uh, Leon, if Abbot and the lady here want to drive in in the rig I can send out a buggy for you and Miss Jinny."

"See here," Doug objected, "we'll make our own arrangements."

"Doug," Aunt Liz's pleasant voice broke in, "I feel an attack of hay fever coming on. I think you had better drive me into town right away."

Jinny sent her a glance of heartfelt thanks. She watched the buggy turn and careen away with a sensation of immense relief.

"Hey, who's coming now?" the sheriff roared from his saddle. "Uhhh, I thought so." He touched his spur to his horse's flank. "I'll leave you to handle this, Clark."

A flashy little pinto was pounding along over the mesa. The sun shone on golden hair and a blue satin blouse as Ada Nary reined aside to let her father and Sam and their prisoner pass her. Then she came on. She stopped the pony and dismounted.

"I couldn't wait, Leon!" she cried, as though there was no one else in the whole canyon but the two of them. "I just couldn't wait till you got to Mescal to tell you that I'm"—she dropped her lashes coyly and then finished boldly—"I'm ready to make up."

She placed both hands on Leon's arm, smiling up at him with supreme confidence. Jinny stood very still. She felt disheveled and tousled. She was achingly aware of the wrinkles in her skirt, the tear in the ruffle where her toe had caught when she had stepped out of the stage-coach, of the loose black cloud of curls tumbling on her shoulders, and of the lack of powder on her face.

She couldn't know that she made a vivid, lovely picture, standing slim and straight in the flooding sunshine. Excitement had painted roses in her cheeks and made her eyes enormous, as mysteriously shadowed and violet as mountains at sunset.

"I reckon you heard about my change of luck, Ada?" came Leon's cool voice.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Ada exclaimed. "Now you can build that new house at the ranch. We can do everything we planned in the spring, before you went on the cattle drive."

Now, thought Jinny desolately, she could just get right out of the picture. Leon had his beloved ranch back. And he had Ada back. Ada who had been born and reared in this country, and who was plumb beautiful.

She walked swiftly toward the cabin, trying to shut her mind to Leon's low, murmuring voice speaking to Ada. She missed the cabin, because of the blur in her eyes, and kept walking over the mesa, over the dry, tufted grass and bright stones. She had to walk because she couldn't turn around and face the other two.

"What's your hurry?" came a quiet voice at her shoulder.

Jinny lifted wide purple-dark eyes to look into Leon's grave face. She could say nothing at all. His glance dropped to her hands clenched tightly together.

"Why," he remarked, "you aren't wearing that ring."

"No." She managed to add, almost naturally, "I've known Doug all my life, or thought I did. But he suddenly turned out to be a stranger." She swallowed painfully and then asked, "Isn't Ada waiting for you?"

Leon shook his head. "Another stranger behind a familiar mask. Funny what a little hard luck, or danger, will bring to light." His voice became soft as the morning breeze moving over the grass. "Now a rancher like me needs a girl who's brave and strong and quick on the trigger. A girl who'd jump in and help me run a two-bit spread if need be, but who'd make a mighty lovely queen of Rancho Reata." He touched her shoulder lightly. "How about it, Jinny?"

She turned to him swiftly. Her answer was in the dancing golden lights in the wide blue eyes, in the quiver of the soft red lips lifted to his. His arms went around her warmly, holding her close and tight, forever.

"Little and sweet as a blue-eyed doll," he murmured, "but pure dynamite. Sweetheart, you walked right into my heart way back at that dance in the Diamond Palace and I reckon you're there to stay."

●

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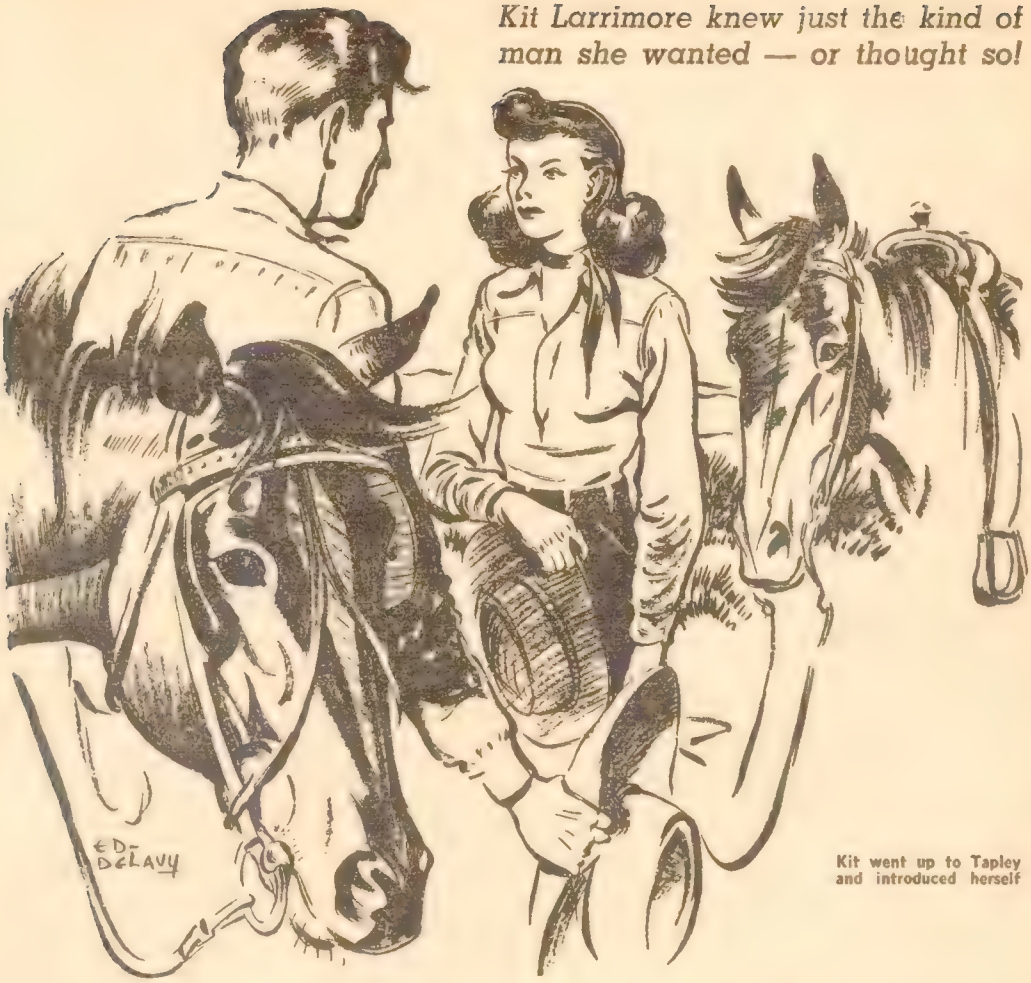
Kit Larrimore knew just the kind of man she wanted — or thought so!



Kit went up to Tapley and introduced herself

A Lady Changes Brands

By CYLVIA S. ELVAY

FROM the porch of the Sunset Hotel in Liberty Springs Kit Larrimore watched Cary Blaine ride into town and turn his horse over to Anse Willett in front of the livery stable. Blaine was wearing his gun and his cowboy boots again, and Kit guessed now that what the paper had said two days ago was true—that the Cold Spring farm out by Nightowl Creek was up for sale.

Kit watched Blaine lean against the lamp-post and build a smoke. His every action seemed listless and laborious. She knew she had to get the heartbreaking chore over with sooner or later, and it might just as well be now. She swallowed hard to get the lump out of her throat, made sure her eyes had no mist in them, before she walked down the steps of the porch.

Blaine caught sight of her and straightened to his full six feet. He cuffed his hat back over his damp black hair, and his eyes told

her that he was afraid of what was on her mind.

"You look mighty sweet in that blue dress, Kit," he said. "Ought to wear it more often." Then the smile disappeared from his long, lean face, as he watched her slip a ring from the third finger of her left hand. "Is it as bad as that, Kit?" he asked.

"You swore you'd never leave that farm until you made a go of it, Cary," Kit said. "You quit too early to suit me." She felt the pain of this moment and hoped it was not showing in her eyes or in her talk. "I read the paper, and I can see you're going to ask Harry Webb for a job at the Slash J." She got the ring off and handed it to him.

He held it in his palm and stared down at it for awhile, then looked at her and grinned bleakly.

"Wa'n't much of a stone, was it, Kit? Have to keep twisting it this way and that to get a sparkle out of it. Best I could do at the time. . . . Well, you read and heard right. I got enough of bein' a sodbuster. Lost what little money I had in that place. The drought —the storm that flattened the winter wheat —disease got my cows—"

"You could have tried another few months," Kit said. "Do you think a fairy with a wand made these cattle ranches and the towns throughout the West?"

Blaine put the ring in his pocket.

"Maybe the blond waitress at the Star Lunch would like it," he said, and Kit knew he could not have been hurt more than if she had struck him with a whip. "I put up a fight, Kit. I'm getting a good price for that place, everything considered. Well, lots of luck, Kit. I figure I better go and meet Webb." He lifted his hat, turned and walked away from her.

Kit hurried over to the hotel and got into the Bar O automobile, one of the few modern vehicles in the county. She drove it at break-neck speed out of Liberty Springs, the wind and the dust having little to do with the tears in her eyes.

When she drove into the yard, she nearly liquidated two valuable Bar O horses with two good men in the saddle. The tires squealed when she stopped in front of the ranchhouse in a great cloud of dust, and Ed Larrimore got out of his chair in a hurry. He was sure he would not have to wear the shiny black shoes he had bought for a wedding. The shoes pinched his feet anyway.

"You saw Cary, Kit?" the white-haired cattleman asked.

"For the last time," Kit said, and let anger fight the ache that was in her heart. "He did quit, Dad!" She went into Ed Larrimore's big arms and did the rest of her crying.

"Takes a heap of man to make a farm go, Kit," Larrimore pointed out. "Older heads than Cary's have got tired of knockin' against a wall. But he won't go nowhere workin' for Webb. Wish this spread was in better shape so's we could all make a go of it."

"I don't want that," said Kit. "You made this one of the best ranches in the State at one time, and through your own efforts, Dad. No man has a right to come along and take up where you left off. The man I marry has to support me by himself."

"Times are different, Kit," her father explained. "Them days, there was lots of land to take for the askin'. But it's been worked and chewed out a lot. The best days are gone, and raisin' cattle is not as important as it used to be. New-fangled ideas comin' in that'll put a lot of punchers out of a job. The price of beef—"

But Kit was stubborn where Cary Blaine was concerned.

"He couldn't make a go of it," she insisted. "We'll see what the man does who bought it from him. That ought to be a fair test, oughtn't it?"

"Reckon so, if he ain't a millionaire," Larrimore said. "Think we better go in and get a bite, Kit." He looked at the finger on her hand where the engagement ring had been for almost two years, and he felt a twinge of regret. "You look a little strange without it, Kit."

"I feel a little strange. Let's not talk about it any more," she said. . . .

CURIOSITY soon got the better of Kit. She saddled a paint and went riding along the road that led to Cold Spring Farm. It was only a week since she had seen Cary Blaine but those few days had seemed interminable.

She rode for almost three hours before she came to the little clapboard house set off the road. She loved the place with its green lawn and ancient oak trees. Behind the little barn the meadow slanted downward to a winding creek that flashed silvery when the moon was just right. There was a perennial garden near the house where she had planted roses and currant bushes.

A dead-axe wagon was backed up to the steps, and a horse that was not Blaine's was saddled and hitched to the little porch rail. The wagon was piled with household and farm equipment, and it looked as if it had seen long service. Kit rode into the yard, saw the man leaning against the porch, filling his pipe. He was not much older than Blaine. He had sandy hair and pleasant brown eyes, and his mouth seemed a little too narrow until he grinned.

The grin was infectious, and Kit got off the paint and strolled over to him.

"I'm Kit Larrimore," she said. "A neighbor, I guess you would say. Bar O Ranch."

"Mine's Jim Tapley. Call me Jim."

Tapley looked like a farmer. He wore an old low-crowned slouch hat and faded dungarees. His shirt was a washed-out blue cotton with patches. Kit was pretty sure the man had no wife by the quality of the mending.

Another man, stout and bushy-browed, came out of the house.

"Come on, Jim," he called. "We ain't got all night." And then he saw Kit.

"Meet Kit Larrimore," Jim Tapley said. "Lives around here, Chet. Miss Larrimore, Chet Poole."

"Sure am glad to meet you, ma'am," the stout man said. "Reckon you think we're a couple of fools to tackle this place, huh? Me, I got to get used to it more'n Jim. I quit a foreman's job in a mill to come out here."

"I'm sure you'll get along all right," Kit said with a smile. "If the stove is still there, I could make you some coffee."

"No thanks, ma'am," Poole said, and Tapley scowled at him. "Looks a little like rain an' I figure we got a lot of work to do. Some other time we'd sure like to have you visit us."

Kit offered Tapley her hand. He did not seem to want to let go of it and she had to pull away.

"Sorry," he said. "Kind of seemed to belong where it was."

She rode out of the yard and followed the road for about a mile, then cut across a meadow and took a short cut over a brush-studded ridge that led to a benchland where cattle grazed. Most of the animals bore Webb's Slash J brand. There was a small line cabin over in the shade of a clump of cottonwoods, and three broncs were ground-moored near it, nibbling at the sun-parched grass.

Kit knew about every cowpuncher in the valley and was fond of them all, preferring their chatter to the idle gossip of most women. Getting close to the cabin, she looked through the open window and saw Cary Blaine sitting at a table with two other men she recognized as Andy Gibb and Lank Ullman of the Bar O. She could hear Blaine's words. He had a pack of cards in his hand, and was waxing eloquent.

"Nothing like it, seems, my friends. Take a look at this deck of cards, now, an listen to me very closely. Months back they dealt me the queen of hearts. Carried her around with me until about a week ago, when all of a sudden I looked in my pocket an' it was gone. Back in the deck ag'in, gents. Thought you'd like to know, as all of you gents who bought weddin' presents already, can get their money back. Because—I'm an o-o-ol' cowha-a-and who lo-o-ost his la-a-and. Nothin' more for me-e-e-e but the Rio Gra-a-and!"

Kit reined close to the window, kicked her boot against the sill and Cary Blaine's head jerked around.

"Very touching, Mr. Blaine," she choked out. "But your voice is even worse than your lyrics. I just rode by that farm and I met the man I thought *you* were!" She swung the paint clear and was nearly out of sight before the cowpuncher could get to the cabin door.

Kit had felt sorry for Blaine, knew there would have been a chance of reconciliation if he had asked for it, if he had looked at her a certain way, or had taken her in his arms. Back there, he had subjected her to humiliation, had made light of the precious months they had planned a life together, and so there was nothing left now, not even fragments.

Out of sight of the line cabin, Kit dismounted, stretched out on a soft bed of pine needles and cried out her lost love for Cary Blaine. When she got back into the saddle again, she was sure she was cured and would never again waste any of her sympathy on him.

THREE days later there was a social at the Liberty Springs Church, with old-fashioned dances held outdoors. Japanese lanterns swung from wires stretched between the trees, and there was a seven-piece orchestra from Platte. Jim Tapley had ridden over to ask Kit to go with him, and she had

accepted the invitation. She put on her best crisp white dress and daintiest shoes and wore a flower in her hair.

Every eligible male for miles around gave Tapley trouble during the social, with the possible exception of Cary Blaine. Most of the time, Cary leaned against the side of the refreshment table, feasting his eyes on Kit. She knew it, and took a fiendish delight in distributing her favors to all save him.

Kit had just finished dancing with Jim Tapley, and was putting some lightning swift touches to her hair when Cary came up to her.

"You could have given me a chance to explain, Kit," he said reproachfully. "Reckon you forgot a man has to hide his feelin's somehow, like I was doing out there in the line cabin. Men can't just go somewhere alone and cry like a woman, so they—"

"I've forgotten all about it, Cary," Kit cut in. "You are making a mountain out of a molehill. I'll dance with you once, if you wish."

"Thanks just the same, Kit," the puncher said. "I don't want things that way. That Tapley is a handsome cuss, ain't he?" He walked away and kept on going.

Kit watched him until he was out of sight around the corner of the building adjoining the livery stable. She felt all mixed up inside until Tapley, with a sparkle in his eyes, came along with a dish of ice-cream. The orchestra struck up a waltz, and the night and the stars and the music had their way with her.

"You're a good dancer for a farmer," she said to Tapley, and smiled her best.

The weeks went by and one morning Kit rode out to the farm again. The men were not at home, but she noticed that they had plowed up another field, an old shed had been white-washed, and the little lawn in front of the house had been clipped smooth and had been hosed with water. She slipped into the house and hurriedly gathered ingredients with which to make a pie. An hour later, the pie finished and on the window sill to cool, she rode away. There was flour on her nose, and a pleasant song in her heart.

Ed Larrimore commented on the rosiness of his daughter's cheeks when she got back to the Bar O.

"Met Cary, huh? You kind of patched things up?"

She shook her head. Larrimore's eyes narrowed a little, and he thought of Tapley and the things he had heard about him.

"Be careful, Kit," he said kindly. "Takes a little time to really know a man. . . . Glad you came back so soon. Where's that boiled shirt of mine? I'm leavin' for Denver in the mornin'."

"You think you can arrange for that loan, Dad?"

"Don't see why not, Kit. Me an' Kip Rushton went to school together, once. Anyway I'm taking a little collateral along." He turned away from her, but she caught at his arm.

"Mother's string of pearls, Dad?"

"Reckon they were meant for you when you got married, but seems like that won't happen quite yet," he said. "We'll have 'em when the time comes."

Kit saw her father off on the train at eight o'clock the next morning. She stayed in Liberty Springs for awhile to buy a few things she needed. Coming out of the dry-goods store, she saw Pete Jastrow, the sheriff, tacking a reward dodger on the pitted board affixed to the side of his frame office. She stopped and looked at the printed words.

"Still got a few badmen left, Miss Larrimore," Pete said. "This cuss is wanted for holdin' up the Three Town stage. Looks like he's around these diggin's."

"You'll get him soon enough," Kit said confidently. She smiled and went on her way.

A man came hurrying out of the hardware store and nearly crashed into her. He had a roll of tar-paper on his shoulder. It was Cary Blaine. He dumped the roll into a buckboard at the curb, then swung around and nodded.

"Mornin', Kit. You must have got up early. How's your pa?"

"Went to Denver," Kit told him. "I rode past that farm yesterday, Cary. They're doing wonders with it."

"They? Sure, Kit," the puncher said. "I was all alone, couldn't afford help. Saw Tapley in town last night. Said you sneaked in while he was out workin' and made him an apple pie. Never made one for the hungry man who used to own the place, Kit. Tapley is a lucky man."

He climbed into the buckboard, spoke to the horses, and drove away. Kit stayed there until he was out of sight. She wished he would go away from the valley. Maybe she could be sure then. She wondered what he had done with her engagement ring.

ED LARRIMORE got back from Denver two days later, and at first Kit thought his trip had been a futile one. The rancher slammed his old suitcase to the floor savagely, bit the end off a long cigar, and glared at the crackling wood in the fireplace.

"Dirty crooks!" he said.

"Whatever is the matter, Dad?" Kit asked. "Did Rushton refuse to—"

Larrimore shook his head. "I got the loan all right," he said, "and then I did a mighty foolish thing. Needed a little ready cash to buy harness with, and I sold that necklace. Well, not exactly sold it. They got what they call pawn shops in Denver. You can redeem things and they give you a ticket.

"Got three hundred dollars and offered one of the bills to the clerk at the hotel. Hour later he called me downstairs and there was a house sheriff with him. They asked me where I got the hundred dollar bill. Told 'em, and then we went to the pawn shop. Feller there described the man who had passed the counterfeit. Yep, that was what it was. Description could have fit a hundred men. They took the bill away from me to show the police. . . . I never did have no use for cities, Kit. Full of crooks."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Kit consoled him. And then she brightened. "But the loan was the important thing. Come on, now. I've got sandwiches and fresh buttermilk made."

The weekly paper came out on Wednesday afternoon. Kit always rode into town in the car to get it. She always went in to see Mrs. Cate who ran the hotel, and had afternoon tea with her on the porch. They discussed the news together.

"Says here," commented Mrs. Cate, "the bugs are worse this year than ever before, and crops are bein' chewed up almost before they sprout. If it ain't drought, it's frost, an' if it ain't frost, it's somethin' else. I feel awful sorry for the farmers."

"You have to be a strong man to last on the soil," Kit said, deep in her own thoughts.

And then Mrs. Cate tackled another item in the paper.

"Well, it looks as if Pete Jastrow expects trouble around, Kit. Got a new deputy, Cary Blaine. You think that Ab Murtrie is really around here? I'm not goin' to leave much cash in the till."

"Cowpunchers and deputy sheriffs," Kit said disspiritedly. "Nothing lasting about either, Mrs. Cate."

Kit went out to the farm a few days later. She saw Jim Tapley out in the field and walked over to talk to him. Tapley was leaning on a hoe and looking at the lacework that had once been green leaves.

"Looks like they're finished, Kit. Dusted 'em with all the stuff I could think of, but these bugs sure have stout stomachs. They're gettin' the cabbage, too. If we don't get rain inside of another week . . ."

"It doesn't seem right," Kit said bitterly. "If what they preach to us is right, why isn't a man given half a chance to raise a crop?"

"Figure there'll be another time," Jim Tapley said. He grinned at her, and she suddenly wished it was Cary Blaine standing there and saying that. But then Jim dropped the hoe and came close for her. "Reckon if I had somebody like you for sure, I'd lick this place, Kit. What chance have I got?"

"A whole lot, Jim," Kit said, not absolutely sure of herself. "You just wait a little longer."

"Sure will," Tapley said.

Three weeks later, when the drought had just about ruined all the work Tapley had accomplished, Kit found him still smiling, still brave. This was the kind of man she knew she wanted.

As if to read her mind, Jim put his arms around her, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to Kit.

"You could have done better if Poole had been more help, Jim," she said. "Most of the time when I came by here, he was never around."

She felt his arms tighten.

"Chet's all right," he said. "A little hard for him to get used to it, Kit. Figure you just never happened to be here when he was workin'."

They sat down and talked over what was to come. Jim said he guessed he would wait a few months before he took her to Cold Spring Farm.

"Need a small addition on the house," he explained. "Lot of things to be done inside before it's real livable for a girl like you."

When Kit got back to the ranch, Cary Blaine was in the yard talking to her father. In spite of herself, Kit's heart did a flip-flop, and she was about to walk by without speaking to either of them, when Cary addressed her.

"Was tellin' your pa that we're pretty sure Murtrie is around these parts, Kit. If

I were you, I wouldn't go out alone on the paint. Better take the auto."

"I can take care of myself!" Kit said indignantly.

"Yes, I guess so," Blaine admitted with a sigh. "Hear Tapley and Poole are havin' a bad time. Feel sorry for 'em. When they gave me the thousand dollar down payment, they said they only had about two hundred left. That Jim Tapley puzzles me. Try to like him, but can't. But I have to feel sorry for him."

"Don't bother!" Kit flared. "He'll get along, and he'll win out where you failed. He already has. I am going to marry him!"

Cary Blaine looked at her, and his face got very white.

"Reckon you are," he said then. "I hope you'll be mighty happy." He turned his horse around, suddenly called back, "I got a ring he can have at a bargain." Then he was riding fast out of the Bar O yard, and did not look back.

"WELL, now," Ed Larrimore said, taking Kit's arm. "Let's go in and talk things over."

"I've told you everything, Dad. I've made up my mind. When a man can go through what Jim Tapley has, and still smile and look toward another year, well, he has what it takes!"

"And so has Cary Blaine," Larrimore said stubbornly. "Anybody who'll go out lookin' for a killer like Murtrie, all alone, so's people can sleep quiet in their beds, has to have a lot of nerve."

He followed his daughter into the house, sat down and picked up a newspaper. Kit was in the kitchen getting some supper ready when he continued his conversation.

"Seems I wa'n't the only one got stuck in Denver, Kit," he said, without looking up. "Lot of them fake bills have turned up there, and for a few miles around. Don't feel like I'm such a sucker any more. Say, you sure you want to marry Jim Tapley? Think it over, girl. Maybe a year of that farm will bust him quick as scat, and then where'll you be?"

"You think I haven't any judgment, Dad," Kit answered from the kitchen. "I'm old enough to know the kind of man I want to marry."

"Even the best of 'em make mistakes," Ed Larrimore said, and sighed deeply. "Sometimes I think even your ma did, Kit."

The tension was broken. Kit laughed, came in and threw her arms around her father's neck. She buried her chin in his heavy white hair.

"Mother was the smartest woman that ever lived, Dad," she said, giving him a kiss.

She went back into the kitchen and hummed a carefree tune. In fact she was so gay that she burned the biscuits, spilled the coffee out of the can, and nearly cut her thumb when she sliced the cold meat.

After supper Kit went out to get her paint horse. She was going to show Cary and her father and everybody that she could take care of herself.

"You shouldn't be ridin' alone, Miss Kit," said one of the helpers in the stable. "That Murtrie is a curly wolf."

"How silly!" she said as she took the reins out of his hand.

Choosing the little-used road over the pass she was soon in sight of Jim Tapley's farm. She rode down to the house, got off the paint and hitched it to a post. She had seen Jim through the window as she came down the long slope, so she knew he was home. But it took a long time before he answered her knock.

He was smiling when he opened the door.

"Kit," he said. "I was grindin' up some tough steak. You have to wait long?"

She shook her head, let him kiss her. He pushed a rocker toward her and she sat down. Chet Poole came out of the cellar, wiping his hands.

"He thinks more of that batch of elderberry wine," Jim said, "than he does of the turnips and the carrots."

"Got to have the wine to keep me from givin' up," Chet said, laughing. "When you two figure on gettin' married?"

"He's plumb sick of his cookin', Kit," Jim said. "Saw Blaine awhile ago. He rode by here. Gave me a couple of good tips about curin' sick shoats. Heard he was lookin' for Ab Murtrie."

Chet sniffed audibly.

"Why would a badman want to locate in this neck of the woods, Jim?" he asked. "What could he find to steal? Murtrie never was a man to swipe cattle, they say."

"We have a stage that runs between here and Fogg's Junction," Kit pointed out. "Sometimes it carries money."

Poole grinned. "Let's hold it up some night, Jim. Heaven knows we need some real money."

They sat a while and talked. Finally Jim

got up.

"I'll ride back with you a ways, Kit," he said.

"Come and see him Thursday night, Kit," Chet Poole suggested. "I won't be here. Goin' up toward Laramie to visit a sister."

Kit's eyes flashed. "I should think you'd stay around more and help Jim!" she said. "He's had a hard time of it, you know."

"Mostly he says I get in his way, don't you, Jim?" the stout man said.

"He does as much as I expected him to do, Kit." Tapley grinned. "I knew it wouldn't be too much. I need his company as much as anything." He took his hat from a peg near the door. "Let's take advantage of the moon before it clouds up."

The moon was full and there was a chill of autumn in the air, but the moon somehow did not seem as big and as bright as it used to. Her paint acted strangely, too. When Jim Tapley reined his dun pony close to him, he would keep side-stepping as if he knew more of what was going on inside his rider's heart than she herself.

"These two broncs won't ever get along, Kit," Tapley said. "Reckon we won't ever keep 'em in the same corral."

"I feel a little cold, Jim," Kit said. "I think I should start home."

"Right. Thursday night, don't forget. We'll go to the movie show at the Elko, but first we'll have supper with Chet at the hotel 'fore he leaves on the stage for Fogg's."

"You have little money to waste," Kit reminded him.

"Chet has a little left." Jim grinned. "Let's forget what it costs and have a little fun. Mostly it's work, and a man needs a little spree in between."

THEY had dinner at Mrs. Cate's hotel and then saw Chet Poole leave for Fogg's Junction. The stage was a long, four-seated, springy affair that accommodated a dozen people and a small amount of express-age and mail. It was filled to capacity and it lumbered and creaked as it got going. Chet was still clutching a package he carried as he waved good-by to his friends.

Kit walked to the Elko with Jim Tapley and they managed to find two vacant seats in back of the little theatre. The picture was about a girl who did not realize how much she loved a man until she lost him, and she ended up in a big city, disillusioned and poverty-stricken.

The audience did not have the benefit of seeing the happy ending, because just then there was a loud commotion outside and the word spread like wildfire that Ab Murtrie had held up the stage. It had come lurching back into Liberty Springs and was out there now. The driver had been shot.

"Chet was on that stage!" Jim Tapley exclaimed. "He—"

Kit hurriedly put on her hat and followed Jim out into the street. The stage was in front of the hotel, and the driver, Tom Kilrea, was walking unsteadily along the walk to the doctor's office, blood trickling down his arm. Jastrow hurried up to him and learned that Ab Murtrie had jumped the stage only three miles out of Liberty Springs. Tom had swung off the road and bent an axle.

Tapley scuffed through the dust to meet Chet.

"He get your—?"

Chet nodded. "Blast his eyes, Jim! Let's have a drink. Oh, I forget you was here, Kit. Seems like that Cary Blaine ain't no better deputy than he was a farmer. And where was Pete Jastrow—asleep?"

The sheriff heard that last remark and came over to them. He jabbed a fat finger at Poole.

"Don't make no more remarks like that, Shorty," he said, "else I'll kick your pants the length of the street!"

"I'd have somethin' to say about that, Sheriff," Jim Tapley snapped, and there was a light in his eyes that Kit had never seen there before. "Jim, please!" she said in a low voice.

Tapley swung around, seemed surprised that she was there.

"All right, Kit. But it seems to me there's more mouth to our law here than fists."

Jastrow bristled and came toward Tapley.

"I'm twice your age, my fresh bucko, but if you want to find out about my fists, now's the time!" He glanced at Kit and his anger only increased. "I don't like to see you here, Kit," he said. "You don't seem to belong."

The other passengers were grouped in front of the hotel and fretting over the delay. The manager of the stage line appeared and told them they could not get to Fogg's until the axle on the long wagon was fixed, and that he would have to find a substitute driver. A fat drummer strode up, tugging nervously at his big watch-chain.

"That badman had two guns," he said. "He made us all get out and lined us up.

Took close to a hundred dollars offen me. Said I could keep my watch. He had the wickedest pair of eyes I ever did see. Through slits in his mask—"

"I'm goin' out to the farm, Jim," Chet Poole said. "See you there."

"Soon as I see Kit home," Tapley said irritably.

"If it will inconvenience you, Jim, I can manage to get to the Bar O," Kit said generously, but she could not help being afraid.

"What kind of polecat you think I am?" Jim demanded. "Murtrie is around here!"

Chet Poole went to the livery stable and a few minutes later rode out of Liberty Springs. Jim took Kit's arm.

"You ready to go?" he asked.

"It's still early, Jim," the girl said. "I'm very thirsty. We have time to get something at the drugstore."

"All right. All right."

Tapley seemed a little annoyed. He walked her over to Kern's pharmacy across the street. But all the time they were sipping their cherry phosphates, Kit had the strangest feeling that still another picture had not been entirely run through. Jim Tapley smoked one cigarette after another, crushing the butts into the metal ash-tray on the table. Finally he got up impatiently.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to get goin', Kit," he said.

"Of course," agreed Kit, lips tightening. "You go ahead. I have a few errands to attend to. I saw one of Dad's riders in town and he'll be all the protection I need."

"Look, Kit. It's my nerves, maybe. Been workin' too hard, I figure."

Out in the street there was a new excitement. People were running about and there was a lot of shouting.

"It's Blaine and he's caught somebody!" one of the men yelled.

Kit was up immediately and running out of the store. When she reached the walk, she almost collided with Pete Jastrow who was hurrying by. Then she saw Cary Blaine riding down the middle of the street, and behind him another horse carrying a man who rolled drunkenly in the saddle. The man's hands were tied behind him, and he wore no hat.

"It's Murtrie!" the sheriff roared. "Blaine has got Murtrie!"

CARY slipped out of his saddle. One of his long legs buckled under him, but he grinned at Jastrow. He took a canvas sack off the saddle-horn and dropped it into the dust.

"Seems like I caught the cuss, Pete," he said. "I came out on the edge of the bluff overlookin' the road where it crooks near that big dead oak, just in time to see Murtrie ridin' away. All the stuff he got is in that sack, Sheriff."

Murtrie was jerked out of the saddle and he let out a painful curse.

"Careful with him," Blaine cautioned. "I plugged him in two places."

"Hit you, Cary?" Jastrow asked anxiously.

"Grazed my hip a mite," he said. He saw Kit and grinned at her. "Take Ab Murtrie to the doc and have him patched up, then throw him in jail." He looked at Jim Tapley and let out a sigh. "Seems my luck turned a little too late. Fifteen hundred dollars reward out for Murtrie. Might've held on to that farm, Tapley."

Jastrow picked up the sack of loot and carried it into his office.

"Tell the folks to come in here, somebody," he ordered. "They'll have to identify the stuff was stole from 'em."

Kit went up to Cary and put a hand on his arm.

"You're hurt," she said with a worried frown. "Get it taken care of right away."

"In a few minutes," Blaine answered, and he limped into the sheriff's office.

"Come on, Kit," Tapley said. "Let's get goin'."

"Go fetch the horses." she agreed, and there was a big hard lump where her heart should have been.

Tapley had been gone but a few minutes when Cary came out of the office again. He saw Kit waiting there.

"Where's Tapley?" he called, and then he saw Jim leading two broncs out of the livery stable. "There he is!"

Blaine's lips were but a dim pencil line against the grayish tinge of his jaws. His eyes were cold and calculating.

"Tapley, where's that partner of yours? Chet Poole?"

Tapley stopped and looked at the deputy for a long moment, and Kit wondered how such a sudden change could come over a man.

"Went out to the farm, Blaine. Why?"

Just then Pete Jastrow came out of the office with three men.

"Send a couple of boys to pick up Chet Poole," Cary said.

"They're on their way right now." The sheriff's voice was tight.

"Look here!" Tapley bit out. "What's—"

"You might not want to hear this, Kit," Cary said. "I'm sorry. Better go, Kit."

"I'm staying." She looked at Jim Tapley.

"One package Murtrie stole," Blaine said, "has not been identified. Seems it must have been Chet's. Murtrie was breakin' it open when I jumped him. The package was full of money, Tapley. Tens and twenties and some hundred dollars bills. Jastrow tells me they're counterfeit!"

The farmer's eyes betrayed his fear. His mouth twitched and suddenly Kit saw the dangerous glint in those same eyes.

"Cary, look out!"

The hoofbeats of the broncs Jastrow's men rode, thundered out of town just as Blaine fired. Tapley's gun was clearing a hideout holster when the bullet hit him. He tumbled over in the dust.

"Get away from here, Kit!" Blaine exploded. "I hoped you wouldn't be here!"

"I'm not a child," Kit said furiously. "I'll stay if I want!"

She watched Jim Tapley pull himself up, and the realization of the thing she had nearly done made her senses reel. The sheriff caught her before she fell and turned her over to one of the women in the crowd. Then he went after his own bronc.

"Murtrie will identify Chet Poole as the man who carried that package," Blaine said, anxiously watching Kit. "Ab is a tough hombre and the doc said he'd live to hang. All right, Tapley, you're goin' into the jail, on your feet or on a shutter. Get in there! Tried to make yourself look like the real thing to that girl, didn't you? Ought to beat your brains out."

Tapley's fingers clawed at the wound in his shoulder as he stumbled into Jastrow's office. He did not look at Kit.

"Good way to make a farm pay if you can get away with it, Tapley," Blaine continued. "Don't have to worry about drought and hail-stones and chewin' bugs, if you print your own legal tender!"

Kit had gone to the hotel where buxom Mrs. Cate gave her some hot tea and good, homely comfort. They were both sitting on the porch when the sheriff and his men came into Liberty Springs just before dark. Chet Poole was not with them.

BLAINE got up from the chair in the sheriff's office and hurried out to meet the riders. Jastrow's voice carried.

"He put up a fight, Cary. Poole had three guns and he tried to use them all. He is not a pretty sight. We found the plates and the engravin' tools and the paper they used. Looks like Jim Tapley will go away for a long, long time. You want the pleasure of tellin' him the good news, Cary?"

"I sure do, Pete." He turned and walked into the frame building, conscious of Kit's watching eyes from the hotel porch.

"Funny," Mrs. Cate said, her arm around Kit, "what fools even women can be. He would have fooled me if I was young as you, Kit. Imagine, them two crooks makin' money out there, and takin' it up to the big cities and towns to turn it loose. Figure there had to be a third man who—"

"I deserve everything you say about me," Kit said, and started to cry. "I can't ever make it up to him, ever."

"Humph! Don't be trying to tell the likes of me that. I got that ring of yours right in my safe, Kit. Cary asked me to put it there some time ago. Wait, I'll get it."

"No, I haven't the right to wear it!"

"Cary Blaine's got somethin' to say about that," Mrs. Cate said. "About time he really took you in hand, Kit."

As if pre-arranged, Cary was coming up the steps at that very moment and heard Mrs. Cate's remarks.

"Reckon so," he grinned. "I'll take that ring if you don't mind, Mrs. Cate."

Five minutes later, Cary and Kit were alone on the dark porch. He slipped the ring on the third finger of her trembling left hand and kissed her the way he always had.

"Takin' you home, Kit," he said then. "You mind?"

"Cary," Kit mumbled against his shoulder, "I'll never—never look at another man again!"

"Might have to," he said, giving her an extra squeeze. "You could have a son, Kit. He ought to make a good farmer. Take that farm, now. I was thinkin' of a way to make it the best payin' . . ."

Half way to the Bar O, Kit wanted to stop and look at the big moon. It was the same old moon now. Its face was very plain and it seemed to be smiling. The little paint horse rubbed his nose against Cary's bronc. He seemed to know everything had come out all right, too.

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY friends and yodlers, let's git to singin'. This here song happens to hit the nail right on the head about a lot of young rannies in the old days who used to figger that there wasn't nothin' lower'n a nester, unless it was maybe a turtle's stomach.

It also happens that this here song, so I was told, at least, was composed down in Texas when they opened up the land to homesteaders a mighty long time ago, so it goes to prove that cowpokes thought they didn't like such neighbors even as far back as the Civil War.

Now the cause of the trouble between cowmen and nesters is too well known for us to chew the cud over here. You'll remember that the details was that the cowmen didn't want any land fenced because the nesters usually picked out land along where water was, and they naturally fenced the water, and the pore little dogies had to go without a drink unless they got their owners to cut holes in the fences and let 'em through.

Shotguns Made Cowpokes Skittish

But bob wire costs money, and this fence cuttin' made the nesters plumb unhappy, and when a nester was unhappy he was plumb likely to express it with a double-barrel shot gun.

This poppin' noise in a cowman's ears naturally made him skittish, and sometimes his nervous hand would unconsciously come into contact with the handle of his six-weapon, which set off a short circuit through the trigger and exploded the black powder therein. Then through some kind of rangeland radar set-up, the lead would find its way out of the barrel of the sixgun into some vital part of the nester, and gravity would cause his hot Western blood to seek its level, which would be somewhere out on the ground.

These little scientific exercises would sometimes set up actions and reactions like chain lightning until nigh the whole neighborhood was a mass of popping explosives, and honest cowmen and nesters was blowed to atoms long before we tried the same atomic theory on our little brown brothers who got lost on the road in our descent from monkeys.

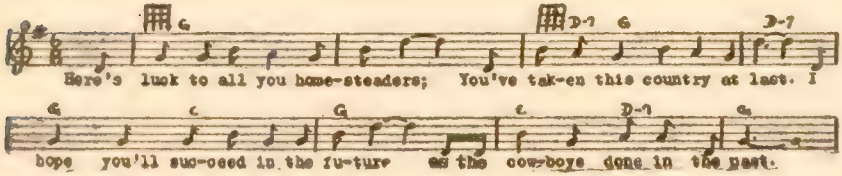
Bob Wire Was Here to Stay!

Anyway, things was hot and heavy for a good many years, but bob wire, just like the horse, was here to stay. Even so, there's a good chance that there was something more than bob wire that kinda quieted the country down.

I'm speaking of an invention that was created a long time ago, another kind of scientific experiment in which you take the following ingredients, namely or viz: a young hombre, a good lookin' gal, maybe a moon, maybe a guitar, just a dash of competition, stir it all together—but you take it from there!

I think you get the idea.

THE NESTER



2.

You've homesteaded all of this country,
Where the slicks and the mavericks did roam;
You've driven me far from my country,
Far from my birthplace and home.

3.

The cattle are still getting thinner,
Of cowhands there's a smaller supply,
You've taken up all of the water
And all of the land that's nearby.

4.

A cowboy rode far into the evening
His limbs at last had grown tired,
He shifted himself in the saddle,
And slowly hung down his head.

5.

He stopped with a nester for supper,
Which was cooked by his daughter named Sue.
They walked neath the stars, and by midnight
He proposed and said he'd be true.

6.

So they fenced up a couple of sections
Including a lot of free range,
And he became just one more nester,
But the fact is—he enjoyed the change!

The Montana Knight

By SHIRLEY MANNERS

Victimized and betrayed, Glenda Allen of the Bar X O Ranch finds new hope when Hap Warren returns from far journeying to take up her fight — and hold forth the promise of love!

CHAPTER I

Out of a Dream

CANYON SPRINGS, cloaked in the purple Montana night, seemed to be calling to Glenda Allen with an enchanted voice. In her room at Seth Bailey's boarding house, where she stood before the mirror fixing a bow in her russet hair, Glenda listened to the soft, persuasive call of it.

Glenda's arched brows drew together. Not for weeks had she heard the siren whispering of the night. Perhaps it was because a full moon sailed serenely over the rocky head of Mt. Eagle—a romantic moon, made of silver fire, that brought back memories.

That was before Sam Allen, her father, had died and left her alone in the world. Before her uncle, Clinton Starbuck, or "Miser" Starbuck, as they called him around town, had taken over the Bar X O Ranch where Glenda had been born and brought up.

Looking at her image reflected in the cloudy mirror, her mind went back over the months. She had thought that the Bar X O, naturally, would be hers.

But hardly two days had elapsed after her father's funeral before Starbuck, with someone named Ed Shelvy, had produced Allen's notes. Starbuck claimed that from time to time he had loaned Sam Allen sums of money. And the notes bore out his statement. There was nothing Glenda could do about it except turn over the ranch and move out.

She had never dreamed that her dad was in debt to Clint Starbuck. There had been a couple of lean years when cattle sales had been at a low ebb. But she'd had the idea her father had paid his bills and run the property from a cash reserve. Glenda had never thought for a minute that Sam Allen would borrow anything from Starbuck.

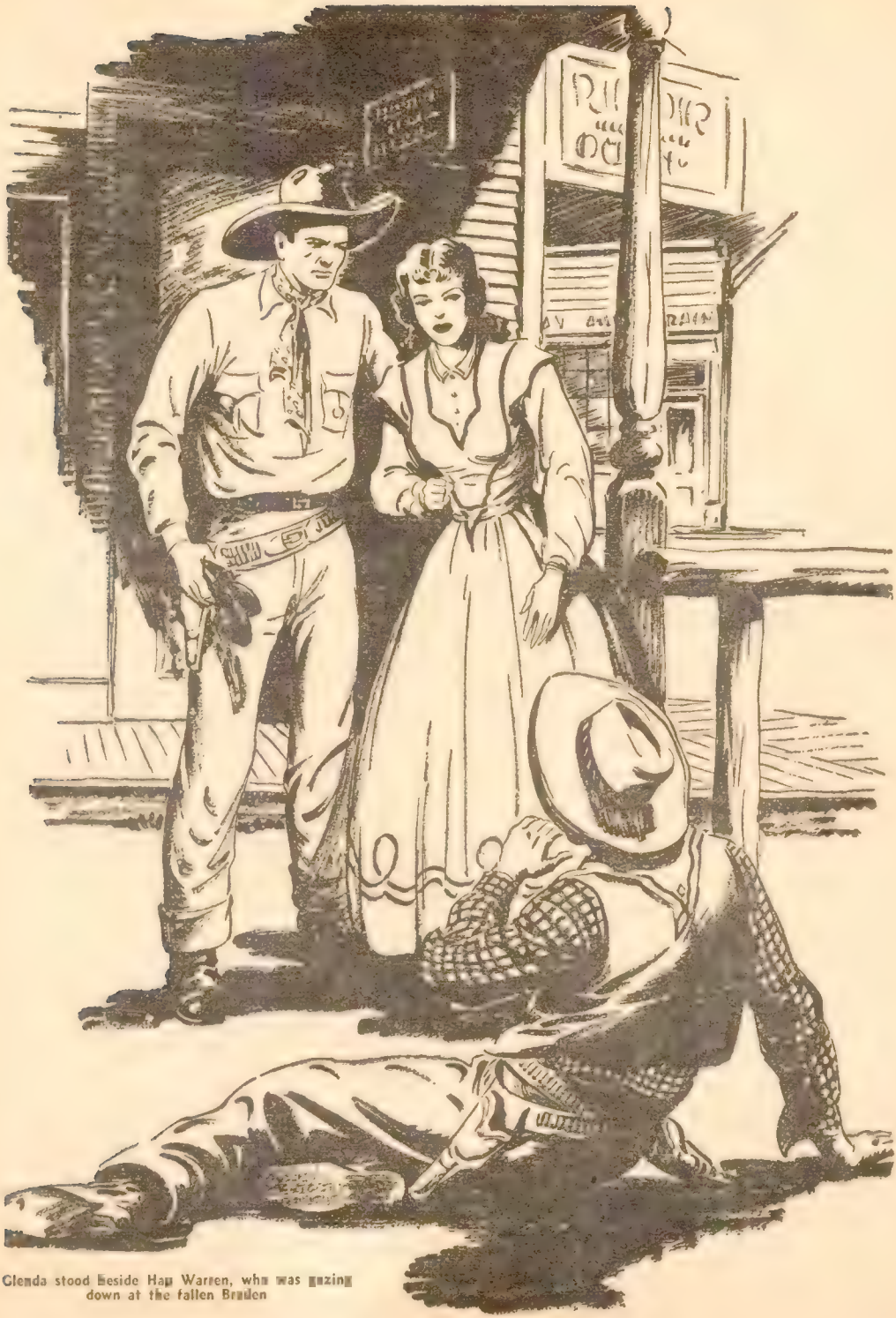
She didn't trust her uncle, or Shelvy, either. A fine pair of vultures. But there was nothing she could prove. Starbuck had the notes, in Sam Allen's familiar scrawl, and the law was on his side.

She had thought it rather queer, though, how quickly Ed Shelvy had faded away after Starbuck had taken over the Bar X O. Faded and disappeared from Canyon Springs.

After that, Glenda had gone to work for Chet Gaffney. Gaffney owned the feed and grain store at the end of town. And she had begun a new life in this room rented from Seth Bailey. It had taken time to adjust herself to the new order of things, but gradually she had made the change, putting away her heartaches and suspicions, her doubts and hurt pride.

One thing, though, haunted her. That was "Hap" Warren. Hap, foreman at the Bar X O, had refused to work for Starbuck. He had quit the day before the old man took over. He had said good-by to Glenda, telling her he was going to try his luck "out Wyoming way," and had promised to write, but she had never heard from him.

She couldn't put Hap Warren out of her mind. Handsome, slow-spoken, and one of the best riders and ropers in the county, Warren had stirred Glenda's heart and imagination.



Glenda stood beside Hap Warren, who was gazing down at the fallen Braden

She remembered so well one night, just before Sam Allen had been stricken with his last illness, when she had been riding back to the ranch with Hap. They had stopped their ponies near the outer fences, in the molten glow of another full moon. There had been a breathless hush, a minute of uncertainty, and then Hap's arms had gone around her, his breath had caught in her hair and his lips had been over hers in a warm, thrilling kiss.

Their first kiss!

Every word he had said to her that night still rang in Glenda's heart like the chime of silver bells:

"Reckon I've been in love with you for a hundred years or more! I'm always going to be in love with you. You've got your brand on me, sweetheart!"

Glenda blew out the light now and went down the stairs. Outside, the breeze off the range was filled with the smell of clover. She breathed it in, her pulses beginning to beat faster.

What was the matter with her? Was it the memory of that other night stealing back through the star-laden dusk to fill her mind with all the magic of a story book romance?

Glenda passed the post-office. Wranglers, cowpokes, ranchers and town people nodded to her as she went along. Near the Three Dice Saloon Glenda caught sight of a familiar figure—a thin, gnarled man with a sharp, hawklike face and deep-set eyes who stood in the shadows talking to Frank Sanford.

Sanford owned the Golden Circle Ranch at the north end of the Springs, but Glenda didn't look at him. Her sea-colored eyes focused on her uncle as he bent closer to Sanford, gesturing with a clawlike hand.

She went past the two men, turning her head so she wouldn't have to speak to Clint Starbuck, and hurried a little faster. She wondered what her uncle was up to. Starbuck was anti-social, so if he had some business with Sanford it would be, Glenda thought, all to his own advantage.

She moved her shoulders as she went on, crossing the main street at a little distance below the Trail's End, dance hall, saloon and gambling resort all in one, and with a restaurant distinctly partitioned off from the barroom.

Glenda had hardly reached the opposite side of the street when she heard her name called:

"Miss Allen—Glenda! Wait a minute."

She turned as Bart Braden hurried up to her. In the half-light the silver studding on his wide belt glimmered. So did the decorations on the holsters of his six-guns. His Stetson was pushed back on his matted black hair and his eyes were bright in his weathered face.

Once, Braden had worked for her father. He hadn't been much of an asset. He drank a good deal and was not reliable. Sam Allen had fired him and after that, Braden had drifted from job to job, finally to earn a precarious livelihood in the Canyon Springs' gambling places.

HE STRETCHED out a hand to catch her arm, Glenda evaded it and frowned.

"What is it, Bart?"

She studied him, almost suspiciously. Around the Springs, Braden had quite a local reputation as a cowtown Romeo.

The smell of alcohol was heavy on his breath when he stepped closer to her. He smiled, and then he patted his pocket with one big hand.

"Had some luck tonight. Won more'n four hundred dollars. Got the cards runnin' right and cleaned up. Now I feel like celebratin'. How about you and me lookin' in on the dance down at the schoolhouse?"

For an instant Glenda almost laughed in his face. Braden must have had one too many to presume she would spend an evening with him.

She shook her head slowly.

"I'm busy, Bart."

"Doin' what?"

"Going home, principally."

He pushed his hat further back on his head. His eyes focused on her, the lids beginning to tip down at the corners. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and laughed, deep in his throat.

"Maybe you could cancel that, or maybe you don't want to dance with me."

"Maybe," Glenda told him, trying to keep her anger in check. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll be getting along."

She turned to pass him. Braden blocked her way, his hand closing over her wrist. A quiver of anger made Glenda try to wrench her arm free, but his grip was like a band of heavy steel.

"Seems like I've always had a soft spot in my heart for you." His words were blurred. "Long time ago I used to see you

"Some day," Warren whispered, "I'm going to settle down around here—with you—"

around the ranch, pretty as a picture. I used to say to myself that some day when you grew up, I'd come around courtin' you —when I had some money on me. I used to tell myself—"

"You're drunk!" Glenda tried to get her arm free. "Let me go!"

"Not until I tell you the rest of it!"

He moved closer, and through Glenda a wave of repulsion ran like sudden fire. There was no one around—except a man sitting the saddle of a piebald pony with easy grace as he turned the corner.

Glenda looked up into Bart Braden's dark face.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say. Let my wrist go!"

"Sure—after I get a kiss!"

His arm swept her up to his chest in a close-locked embrace. Glenda tried desperately to push him away, to hold him off. But all her strength was futile against his tightening arms. She struggled, the anger in her making her head spin. The sea-colored eyes blazed in the starlight. Braden's face was close to hers—but he didn't get the kiss.

The next instant Glenda heard the muffled thud of a blow.

Braden's arms opened abruptly to release her and she saw him reel back grabbing for his guns.

"I'll take those, Bart!"

The rider of the piebald pony moved like lightning. Before Braden could draw, a second quick uppercut dropped him to the board sidewalk. To Glenda sudden music, coming as if from far away, filled her heart with thrilling happiness. The stranger's voice, his slow, easy drawl! There was only one voice like that in all the world! No wonder the night had seemed enchanted. No wonder it had called to her so persuasively.

Standing over Braden, the rider of the piebald pony was etched with the white shine of the stars. He stood there, slim, young, in the same shabby shirt, worn levis and boots he had worn the last time she had seen him.

But Glenda didn't care.

Out of a dream, Hap Warren had come back to her!

CHAPTER II

Yellow Moon

STRIPPED of his double guns, Bart Braden climbed unsteadily to his feet. Hap Warren broke the Guardians in turn, spilled out their chambered ammunition, dropped the cartridges in his pocket and tossed the twin weapons back to the man.

"All right, Bart—get goin'!"

Braden muttered something under his breath and limped away. Hap Warren swung around and in the next frantic heartbeat Glenda was in his arms.

"Hap!" she heard herself whispering huskily. "It is you! You've really come back!"

"Like I told you I would!"

"But such a long time!" Glenda cried softly. "And you never wrote—once!"

"Never had time."

His kiss was like magic fire. Glenda shut her eyes and clung to him rapturously.

"Always hoped the next day, or the day after that, I'd be heading this way again," he told her. "Miss me?"

"So much, Hap!"

A few minutes later Warren tied the piebald to the hitchrail in front of the Trail's End. A cowboy fiddlers band was making range music when Hap and Glenda went into the dining room. They could hear it from the dance hall. Steve Sawyer, the manager, got a table for them, looking from Glenda's flushed face to Warren's handsome profile.

"So you've come back, Hap? This place ain't been the same since you dusted out. Stayin' a spell?"

Warren shrugged. "It all depends." He smiled across at Glenda. "Bring us the best in the house, Steve. Anything Miss Allen wants."

Warren pulled a bill from his pocket and slapped it down on the table. A big bill, Glenda saw. More than she made working a week for Chet Gaffney. Steve nodded and turned away. The fiddles broke into a lively tune. Dancing feet stomped in the partitioned-off dance hall, but Glenda was interested in nothing except the attractive brown face of the man across the table from her.

Hap had come back! But how long was he staying? What had he meant by "it all depends"?

Little by little, Glenda got Hap Warren's story from him. He had gone to Wyoming, drifting around from spread to spread. He had broken horses, bulldogged steers in local rodeos, done all sorts of work. He made it sound gay and exciting, but something her father had once said came back to Glenda:

"Nice lad, Hap Warren. But I reckon he's a rollin' stone. No settle-down to him."

Warren turned the conversation to the Bar X O and Clinton Starbuck. Glenda's pretty face shadowed.

"I still think there's something funny about the way he took over," she said slowly. "I've tried to figure it out, but I can't. Those notes of Dad's—he never had any secrets from me. And yet he never said a word about borrowing money from Starbuck."

"Old varmint!" Hap Warren said, vehemently. "He ought to be tarred and feathered."

He was about to add something more when a shadow fell across the table. Glenda looked up as a soft voice spoke with just the right amount of surprise and pleasure:

"Why, it's Hap Warren! I thought you looked familiar, but I couldn't believe it really was you!"

Rita Sanford smiled at Warren as he got up and took the slender white hand she offered. The girl, daughter of the Golden Circle's owner, was darkly beautiful. Elongated eyes were like shining black stars in her creamy face. For despite the Montana sun, her skin was milky, clear and flawless. Ebon hair in a long, flowing swirl brushed her shoulders and her curved lips were red and inviting. Even in riding skirt and bright yellow blouse she had an air of fashion about her.

Glenda looked at Rita Sanford quizzically. From what Chet Gaffney had said about the feed bill Frank Sanford owed, she had decided things were not going too well for the Sanfords. The ranch had had a lot of trouble getting help. Acid conditions and erosion had laid a blight on the grazing grounds and the Circle's stock was below par.

WHILE Rita chatted animatedly with Hap Warren, Glenda watched the girl with interest. Rita had a reputation as being a man-trap. She had lots of admirers. Now, Glenda saw, she was using her charm and

beauty to impress Hap Warren. Resentment began to creep through Glenda. Hap hadn't come back to Canyon Springs, and to her, to fall a victim to Rita Sanford's wiles.

She reached out and let her hand fall lightly to Warren's sleeved arm.

"Didn't you say you wanted to dance, Hap? We can hear the music from the dance hall in here."

His gaze, switching back to her, was bright with sudden understanding.

"Reckon I did. Excuse me, Miss Sanford. Mighty nice to have seen you again."

"You must stop in and see us when you're out our way," Rita murmured.

Her smile was friendly enough when she looked back, but in the depths of her dark eyes Glenda saw a challenge meant only for her.

"She looks a lot different," Warren said, when they were out on the dance floor. "Got real pretty."

"Think so?" Glenda tried to make it sound indifferent, dismissing the subject of Rita with a shrug. "Don't you really know how long you're going to stay, Hap?"

"It all depends."

"That's what you said to Steve. Depends on what?"

For a minute he didn't answer. Glenda saw his tanned face sink into serious lines. He looked away, across the barnlike dining room and for just a fleeting second she caught the impression of mystery. As if his return to Canyon Springs was for some purpose he was keeping secret.

"How about you getting a cayuse somewhere?" Warren suggested, when the cowboy band in the dance hall brought the dance to a noisy conclusion. "Big yellow moon outside and I certainly would like to feel the old range under me again."

There were three horses in Gaffney's barn, back of the feed store. Chet had told Glenda she could help herself, any time she wanted to use one. Her heart quickened its beat. A yellow moon, the clover-sweet air and Hap riding along beside her!

"I know where I can get a mount," she told him abruptly. "Come on, help me saddle."

In a little while they rode north, toward the canyons around Mt. Eagle. The moon made a bright path for them, silvering the sage and the greasewood when they reached the stony trail skirting the first canyon. Glenda gradually began to lose the annoyance Rita's attention to the one beside her had aroused. She began to feel happy again, as if a cloud had rolled away, a dark, unpleasant cloud.

A mile or more and they turned to take the down trail cutting in between the Lazy S property and the Bar X O. Faraway a coyote howled. The air was still, the night seemed to tiptoe up to them, hushed and mysterious.

Suddenly, Glenda realized they were on the same strip of range they had ridden together that other long ago night. Hap must have purposely chosen the way. More distance, and they were at the outer fences of the property that now belonged to Clinton Starbuck. They stopped the horses there and Warren's arms went around Glenda's slender waist.

"Love me, sweetheart?"

She shut her eyes, red lips parting like the petals of some exotic crimson flower. His kiss sent tingling currents sweeping through her. She urged herself close to him in a little frenzy of longing and rapture.

"Some day," she heard Warren whispering, "I'm going to settle down around here, with you."

She opened her eyes. "Some day! When?"

"I can't say, off hand. It all depends—on things."

"What kind of things? Hap, tell me why you came back."

"I came back to see you, as I said I would."

"But there's some other reason. I know it, I can feel it."

He shrugged, releasing her. "Maybe so. If you'll be patient for a while you'll know."

"You won't tell me?"

"Not now."

He seemed about to add something, but changed his mind, and after a few minutes they started the ponies back toward the Springs.

LATER, in her room at the Bailey's, Glenda lay restlessly awake. The yellow moon that had looked down on her when she had been in Hap Warren's embrace, crept in under the edge of the lowered shade.

Her mind went back over the evening. Bart Baden stopping her on Main Street . . . Hap, like a figure stepping out of a dream, coming along at the right moment . . . And Rita Sanford, with the stiff, fixed smile on her red lips and the challenge in her eyes. . . .

The next day, while Glenda took time out

for a mid-day meal, Sheriff Adam Crosby stopped her in front of the feed store. Crosby, stout and bald, had a round pink face and shiny store teeth that clicked when he spoke. He dusted his hat on a knee and shifted his tobacco cud.

"Kinda unexpected, Hap Warren comin' back," he observed. "Did he say where he's been?"

"Yes, out Wyoming way." Glenda added, "He's staying at the Ace Hotel."

The Sheriff frowned, darting a look at her.

"'Out Wyoming way?'" he repeated. "Funny, but I heard different."

It was Glenda's turn to frown. She looked up at him.

"What did *you* hear, Sheriff?"

"Just idle talk, I reckon. Some folks sort of had the idea Warren come straight back here from Chicago."

Glenda drew a quick breath.

"Chicago? That's impossible. Hap's never been in Chicago in his life."

Crosby moved his fat shoulders.

"Maybe not. But at least that's the way I heard it. But you know how gossip is, Miss Allen. Lotta talk—all of it crooked as a bowed tendon."

He shifted his tobacco again and Glenda, going back to her desk in the office, sat thoughtfully still. Hap in Chicago? He hadn't mentioned that to her. She knew he would have if he had been there. He had always wanted to go to Chicago, always had dreamed about it, talked about it.

Finally, she shook her head as if to clear it and turned to the open ledger before her.

Then swiftly, the mystery she had felt last night returned to haunt her cryptically. Why had Hap come back? Had he really been in Chicago and was he keeping it secret—like his reason for being in Canyon Springs again?

Glenda wondered.

CHAPTER III

Ticket to 'Frisco

CHET GAFFNEY finished supervising a load of feed for the Lazy S and barged into the office around noon the next day. Glenda's boss was a rugged individual. Reddish-brown hair curled over his ears. He had a hand-hewn face with a jutting chin and plenty of nose. But his granite exterior was belied by the mild blue eyes under shaggy brows.

Chet had been one of Sam Allen's friends in the old days. When he had heard that Clint Starbuck was taking over the Bar X O, he had lost little time in offering Glenda a job. She would always be grateful to him, she knew, for his kindness.

Gaffney let a spike file pierce the carbon sales memo for the order he had just filled, rubbed his beard stubble on the back of his hand and sat down heavily in the chair at his desk.

"Burke Conover got in this mornin'," he said. "Saw him at the depot."

Glenda looked up from the ledger. Conover? It took her a minute or more to remember. Burke Conover, interested in scientific ranching, had several model spreads throughout the state. It was his business to by them, stock them with choice cattle and then put into operation all his pet theories. Conover cattle brought top prices. Glenda looked across at Gaffney.

"What is he doing in town?" she asked, idly.

Gaffney cleared his throat, hoisting his boot heels to the ledge of the desk.

"Dunno. He wouldn't say, but I expect he's sorta nosin' around. Some mighty nice buys down this way."

"Yes, mighty nice."

"And Conover," Gaffney added, "was never one for hagglin'. When he sees what he wants he's willin' to pay for it, regardless."

Glenda thought that over, listening to the buzz of a bottle-fly on the screened window. There weren't many ranches for sale around Canyon Springs. She wondered if Burke Conover had a lead, if he had made a proposition to anyone.

Then her thoughts went back to Hap. With an effort she tried to put him out of her mind and concentrate on her work. But it was hard with Hap smiling at her out of some secret nook in her heart. Finally she shut the ledger in front of her and took up one to make out bills.

"I see Bart Braden's left town," Chet Gaffney said, getting up. "Adams says he cleared out last night—him and three or four of his pards. Good riddance, I say."

Glenda let her sea-green eyes wander in Gaffney's direction. So the burly Bart had finally decided to move on. She was glad of that. The other night, with Braden trying

to kiss her, was still sharp in her thoughts. As Gaffney said, Canyon Springs could do without Bart Braden and his friends.

When Glenda came from the rear of the store, her heart leapt when Chet Gaffney told her someone outside was asking for her. Hap? She raced for the front door and outside. But it was not Warren's voice that greeted her. Glenda grew tense as she heard the high-pitched, squeaky tones of Clinton Starbuck.

"Glenda, listen," he said. "I ain't got no time now, but I want to talk to you—tonight."

For just an instant she felt a wave of annoyance. For weeks her uncle had paid no attention her. When Starbuck had passed her on the street he had looked the other way. Not that she wanted his nod or recognition, but the deliberate way he chose to ignore her was hardly in keeping with the grudging cordiality he put into his voice now.

"Why, Uncle Clint," she said. "I don't know of anything you could say that I'd be interested in."

"Wait a minute!" He sounded alarmed. "Don't get riled. I've got to see you, Glenda. This here is for your own good. Suppose you meet me at the Ace Hotel at eight o'clock sharp. You won't be sorry. I—I've got something to talk over that you'll be mighty glad to hear."

Glenda just stood there, hardly knowing how to take this, what to say. Uncle Clint Starbuck almost begging her to meet him. What did it mean? What did he want that he couldn't tell her now? More important, would she be at the Ace Hotel at the time he designated? She couldn't say anything more to him because he was already hurrying up the street.

ALL afternoon the questions repeated themselves. When she finally closed the safe in the office, combed her glimmering hair, and left for the day, Glenda stopped off at the Ace Hotel. The clerk gave her an approving smile when she went across the time-worn lobby. A few cattlemen, lounging in the battered leather chairs, looked up from their Helena newspapers.

"Hap ain't in his room," the clerk said, glancing at the key rack behind him.

"Did he say what time he's coming back?" Glenda asked. "Or where he was going?"

"No, ma'am, he didn't. You can leave a message if you want."

"I'll come back later," Glenda replied.

It was hot in the street. A buckboard rattled by, gray with alkali. Ranch hands, coming in for a night off, were leaving their ponies in front of the Three Dice Saloon. The usual sun-bathers were on the post-office porch.

Glenda passed the spot where Hap had broken up Bart Braden's attentions to her and went on to Seth Bailey's boarding house. Her room was stuffy with the remains of the day long heat. She stretched out on the bed, still puzzling over Starbuck's call on her. She had wanted to find Hap and ask his advice about keeping the appointment her uncle had made. Where was Hap?

Glenda dozed off. When she awoke blue twilight was at the windows and the street below noisy with voices, the creak of wagons and the thud of hoofs. Someone was knocking on her door. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and sat up.

"Yes?"

"Grub in fifteen minutes," Seth Bailey called in. "Ma's gettin' ready to set it out."

"I'll be down."

She lighted the lamp and poured cold water in the basin. A dash of it on her smooth cheeks banished the last of her slumber. Refreshed, she arranged her hair, changed her dress and went down to supper.

Somewhere between the stew and Ma Bailey's home-made apple pie Glenda had a bright idea. Why not go back to the Ace a few minutes prior to the time Starbuck had set to meet her? Then she could see Hap and get his opinion on whether or not to listen to what Starbuck had to say.

Glenda hurried through the remainder of the meal, said good-night and went out into the light-shot dark of Main Street.

The lights coming from the Trail's End scorched a colorful smear in the gloom. There was a line in front of the schoolhouse waiting for the woman who ran the library there to come back from supper, ranchers and cowhands on the veranda of the Ace Hotel when Glenda went up the steps. But no Hap Warren. She made sure of that before she went on and into the lobby.

The clerk shook his head at her question.

"No, Hap's not in his room. He ain't been back since this afternoon."

Glenda, puzzled, was deciding what to do when, in the doorway, she glimpsed a familiar figure. Clinton Starbuck had come in and was moving toward her. He looked thinner than ever, gnarled and bent. His wrinkled,

hawklike face and deep-set eyes accented his small, lipless mouth.

He had aged a lot since he had taken over the Bar X O. In the lobby lights he had a predatory, vulturelike look that was more pronounced than ever.

"So you thought it over and decided to come?" His skinny fingers closed over Glenda's arm.

With a little stir of repulsion she moved the arm away from his touch.

"What do you want to see me about?" she demanded.

Starbuck chuckled. "Can't talk in public. Let's go into one of them side rooms." He nodded to the far side of the lobby.

Doubtfully, Glenda followed him into one of the empty cubicles used for writing. Starbuck closed the door, coughed and pointed to a chair. Glenda sat down, watching him narrowly.

"What is it?"

He pulled a chair around to face her and dropped into it. His deep-set eyes, pale and expressionless, fastened on her. He pursed his little mouth, bending stiffly forward.

"Got a letter this mornin'. From a friend of mine in San Francisco. He was askin' about you. Wanted to know what had happened to Sam's daughter. Party named McCallum, Harvey McCallum."

GLENDA remembered the man. He, too, had been a friend of her father. She moved a little in the chair, frowning.

"What about him?" she asked.

"He's got a big business out in 'Frisco. Says he can find a job for you, if you come out."

"I have a job here. Why should I change? I'm doing all right with Chet Gaffney."

The lids dropped over Starbuck's colorless eyes.

"Maybe so, but Canyon Springs ain't San Francisco. Take a party like McCallum. He can help you a lot—get you a fine job and see that you make good money. You'd better think it over, careful-like. You won't get a chance like this every day."

Glenda's brows drew together. It suddenly dawned on her that Starbuck might be trying to get her away from the Springs. She knew of no other reason for him taking an interest in her. Quickly, she made up her mind to probe a little deeper.

"But I haven't any money to go out to the Coast," she said slowly.

Starbuck coughed. He pullled at his chin and she saw his hatchet face take on a new expression. It was one of anticipation, expectancy.

"I'll be willin' to stake you," he said, too quickly. "After all, we're blood kin and you never got a penny out of the ranch. I'll pay your way and give you a mite to live on until you get settled. But you've got to make up your mind right quick. Big businessmen like Mac don't like to wait around for answers."

"Have you his letter with you?" Glenda asked.

Starbuck shook his head.

"No. What's that got to do with it? All you got to do is say yes or no. Then I'll wire McCallum, tell him you're on your way."

"I can't make up my mind as quickly as all that," Glenda said. "I'll have to think it over. Leaving the Springs is a big thing."

"Let me know by tomorrow mornin'." Starbuck couldn't hide the eagerness in his rasping tone. "You won't be sorry, Glenda. This town ain't for you. You're too smart and purty to waste yourself hangin' around Gaffney's place. What you need is a big city and city folks."

Glenda paid no attention to his flattery. When she left him and went out to the porch, her pulses were beating faster. Starbuck had something in the back of his mind. He wanted her out of the way.

Did Burke Conover's visit to Canyon Springs have anything to do with it? She remembered what Gaffney had said that morning, what she had thought, and was more certain than ever that Miser Starbuck was up to something.

"If I could only find Hap," she thought. "He'd tell me what to do."

Then, as she went slowly down the steps, Glenda stopped.

A dusty buggy, with its top down, had come along Main Street and was passing the hotel. Handling the reins was Rita Sanford. Rita, with a bright red scarf drawn over her glossy black hair. The girl was laughing at something the man beside her was saying, and as Glenda's gaze focused on him, something cold tightened around her heart.

No wonder, she told herself, she hadn't been able to find Hap.

Hap was the man beside the exotic Rita, in the dusty buggy!

How long Glenda stood there, staring after the buggy, she wasn't sure. Slowly, the cold chill in her heart ebbed. She drew a deep breath and went on down the steps. After all, she tried to tell herself, why shouldn't Hap ride with Rita if he wanted to? That didn't mean anything important. He might have got a lift into town. She squared her shoulders and watched the buggy come to a stop beside the Trail's End hitchrail.

Rita and Hap went into the dining room, Hap slim and debonair as usual, Rita slender and beautifully built, with music in her walk. The echoes of the girl's gay laugh came back through the noise of the street, like the echoes of wind-blown bells.

Slowly Glenda crossed the street to the schoolhouse library. She was confused and upset. Clint Starbuck's proposition and Hap on whom she had counted, with Rita!

She went into the schoolhouse and got a book, sliding into a seat away from the other intent readers. She opened her book and tried to put her thoughts on the story, but her mind was crisscrossed with thoughts while the drama unfolded on the pages, its plot not nearly as complex as her own problem.

CHAPTER IV
Echo Cave

IT WAS after eleven when Glenda went back to the street. Outside, it was quiet now. The town had settled down for the night, hot and humid under the yellow moon above Mt. Eagle. The dusty buggy with its top down was still at the hitchrack when Glenda approached the Trail's End. The music of the cowboy band drifted out, above the shuffle of feet and the drone of voices.

She listened a minute, then turned toward the lighted dining room beyond the dance hall. Without stopping to reason why, she went on inside. The place was crowded, the tables were filled with late supper customers and others were dancing. Glenda's gaze moved from face to face.

She opened and closed her hands. Nowhere, in the throng, did she catch a glimpse of either Hap or Rita Sanford.

A private room upstairs? Glenda's heart skipped a beat. She forced a smile when she saw Steve Sawyer weaving his way toward her. The Trail's End manager joined her the next minute.

"All alone, Miss Glenda?"

She nodded. "I just stopped in to see if Hap was here."

"He was, up until about a half-hour ago. He was with Rita Sanford, but he was looking for you."

"For *me?*" Sudden relief ran like fire through Glenda. "Where is he now?"

"I couldn't say." Sawyer shook his head. "Him and Rita left, as I told you. About ten-thirty."

"But her buggy's outside."

Sawyer looked surprised.

"Is that so?" He shrugged. "Maybe they're down at the hotel or at the schoolhouse. Try there?"

"No, but I will. Thanks, Steve."

Glenda hurried back to Main Street. She looked in at the schoolhouse library where so many of the town folks regularly congregated, and then the hotel. There was still no sign of either Hap or the girl with the dark eyes. Had Steve made a mistake? Or had he lied? Were Hap and Rita still at Trail's End?

There was nothing more Glenda could do, and it was getting too late for her to be out. She turned around and started back toward Seth Bailey's. Her heart kept time to her steps. She passed the darkened sheriff's office, the pool hall where a few of its regular habitues were still clicking the ivory balls. At the boarding house she got the key from under the front mat, unlocked the door and went quietly on up to her room.

The moon painted the window sills with a molten glow. Glenda pressed her hands over her flushed cheeks. The same yellow moon she and Hap had ridden under just a few nights ago. Or was it a hundred years? Every minute they had shared came back to her troubled mind, sweet with remembrance.

Then, as she started to undress, a pounding on the front door downstairs made a discordant sound in the silence of the house.

Glenda's pulses leapt. She dropped her fingers from the buttons on her blouse, straining her ears. For some unknown reason the knocking seemed to have an ominous note. From down the hall she heard a door open and shut. Then the slap of Seth Bailey's slippers on the hallway matting and his impatient, sleep-thickened voice:

"All right, all right. I'm comin'!" There

was a pause that preceded the opening of the door.

"Just a minute," Bailey said, then, "I'll see if she's got home yet." And again came his steps on the stairs.

Glenda had her door open before he reached it.

"For me?"

"Yep. Didn't know whether you were home or not."

"Who is it?"

"Some woman." Bailey yawned. "Folks come visitin' at the dangedest times."

Downstairs, Glenda raced to the door. It took her a round of seconds to recognize Rita Sanford, another minute to make sense of what she was saying in a thin, strained voice.

"You'd better get the sheriff! They—they've got Hap! He's at the canyon, at Echo Cave! *Hurry!*" Her voice began to trail off.

A stab of cold fear surged through Glenda.

"Rita! Who—what do you mean?"

"They told me he wouldn't be hurt! I swear that's what they said! I didn't know! I had no idea! Get Crosby and go out there as quickly as you can! I'm afraid to! There's still time if you hurry."

THEN, before Glenda could get another word out, Rita was racing away, disappearing down the dark street. Glenda called after her, but the dark-haired girl did not stop, or answer.

Then Glenda grabbed a hat from the hall rack, and was racing down the street herself—toward Sheriff Crosby's house!

An interminable time seemed to elapse before Mrs. Crosby came to the door. And what the sheriff's wife said then sent Glenda's heart down into her boots.

"My husband's over at Brittle Rock, Glenda. Won't be back until tomorrow. Something wrong?"

"There's trouble at Echo Cave!" Glenda cried. "Can you get some deputies and send them out there at once?"

Mrs. Crosby was efficient. She promised to attend to it promptly, and Glenda left. Her legs felt shaky when she hurried down the street. Hap in trouble! Rita! Where was Rita now, and what did she have to do with all this? All at once Glenda remembered the buggy at the Trail's End hitchrack, remembered what Steve Sawyer had told her.

Gaffney's barn, when she reached it, was stapled but unlocked. She shoved the big door back, lighted the lantern that hung on a peg. She got her tack down from another wall peg and took it into the first box-stall on the left. A sorrel mustang with a Flying Arrow brand on its flank bobbed its lean head up as she slipped off its halter-bridle.

Her hand shook as she cinched the saddle girth and got the bit in the sorrel's mouth. She backed him out of the stall, swung into saddle and rode him out of the barn and into the dark.

Echo Cave? That was a few miles north, close to the canyon where she and Hap had ridden together that other night.

Glenda put the horse to a gallop when she cleared the end of the street. She took the open range trail, the moon making it almost bright as day. The cold fear in her heart increased as she rode on, the drumming hoofs of the sorrel beating a rhythm to the questions pounding through her mind.

She began to realize that she was acting without method or forethought. She should have waited and helped Mrs. Crosby get the deputies. Glenda shook her head. She couldn't wait. She would have to trust Emma Crosby to round up the men and send them to the cave. As the sorrel raced on, her mind seemed to clear a little.

From what little Rita had said there was some plot against Hap. Someone had trapped him, was holding him prisoner! Cold logic, inherited from old Sam Allen, began to knife through the last of Glenda's confusion. She, alone and unarmed, could do nothing. To blunder in on whatever was happening was sheer folly. If she were to help Hap it required strategy, cool nerves and clear vision.

A quarter of a mile from the rendezvous Rita had named, Glenda pulled the mustang to a canter and then to a walk.

Ahead, the canyon yawned darkly behind the rock formation of its boulders. Fortunately she knew all of its many trails. As a child she had picnicked out there. With her father she had often gone to Echo Cave, had stood in its shadowy entrance, calling out her name, and hearing it come back to her in ghostly accents. She knew every inch of the terrain, every foot of the way.

Near a knot of cottonwoods, Glenda dismounted. She tied the sorrel to one of the trees, kept to the shadows and struck out for the nearest trail into the canyon. She

moved quickly but quietly down the slope. Loose stone underfoot had to be watched lest it betray her arrival.

The shadows thickened as she went down. Then, where the trail broke and forked in two different directions, she heard the restless movement of horses. At the same minute Glenda saw the dancing gleam of a fire's reflection on the steep walls of the canyon.

Her knowledge of the place came in handy now. She took the left trail because that skirted the edge of the cleared space around the mouth of the cave. It also terminated at the opening of a shaft that twisted down into the cave itself. With her heart beating hard and fast, Glenda drew closer and closer to the flickering fire beckoning beyond.

After a minute she saw the horses tethered in a recess where a wide cut between the boulders made a sort of natural pathway. There were four horses, all of them the wiry ranch variety. Glenda couldn't see their brands, but that wasn't necessary. Ducking low, she moved out on the ledge above Echo Cave's entrance and down there, in the glow of burning greasewood, she caught sight of the night riders and began to understand.

She recognized three of the men as Canyon Springs saddle bums and pool hall hangers-on. Rough-looking individuals who wore shabby levis and hadn't shaved for days. The fourth man who stood a little away from the group as he helped himself to a drink from a whisky flask made Glenda's eyes widen and then narrow.

Bert Braden had left town, but he hadn't gone far!

Perched on the sheltered rock rim above the quartet, Glenda looked for Hap Warren. With Rita Sanford's frightened voice still ringing in her ears, she searched the firelit gloom for the man she loved. The terrifying fear that Braden and these others might already have dealt with Hap clutched at her heart with agonizing dread. She tried to reassure herself, to believe that the four men wouldn't still be there if they had fulfilled their mission.

Proof of that came to Glenda in a thrill of sudden relief when a man squatting near the fire looked up at Braden.

"How long do we pull leather, Bart?" His voice was thick and harsh.

Braden finished his drink, held the flask to the light to see if any liquor remained, and tossed it away. It splintered against one of the boulders. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"We finish off that hombre inside, get the rest of the money and hit for Peckham County. Got pards up there who say the rustlin's good."

"We'd better leave before mornin'," a second man put in laconically. "Crosby's due back in town then."

He stopped significantly. Braden cursed.

"That fathead. He couldn't find a maverick in a box stall."

The fourth man, a lean, stoop-shouldered ex-wrangler Glenda recognized as Cal Dawson, stretched and yawned.

"Let's shoot him now and get it over with."

Braden leered at him. "Bloodthirsty galoot, ain't you? Where's that other flask? I'm still dry as alkali."

"Dry, or gittin' your nerve up?" Dawson drawled.

The man near the fire pulled a flat bottle out of his shirt. Braden grabbed it and used his teeth to draw the cork.

Glenda, her nerves quivering, inched herself along toward the shaft. Hap must be in the cave!

She hoped the bottle would engage Braden's attention and keep him occupied until the sheriff's deputies rode out. But it was a frail hope at best. The big, burly man was not one to linger over his liquor.

He tilted his head back and let the whisky gurgle down his throat like water down a drain. He smacked his lips and broke the second flask the way he had the first.

CHAPTER V
Our Ranch!

AT THE shaft, Glenda fought to control her shaking hands. To get down into the cave meant a drop of six feet or more to a ledge below and then another slide to the stone floor of the cave itself. Pitch black closed about her when she let go and jarred to a stop on the projecting shelf her feet accurately found.

Her breath was burning in her lungs, there was a strange ringing in her ears. She scrambled down the rest of the way, her eyes becoming more accustomed to the thick murk.

With a hand over her pounding heart, Glenda groped around. Her fingertips found

nothing. She tried to get her bearings, to decide the most likely place Hap would have been pushed into. The voices of the men outside were a faint mumbling. A screen of rock kept the fire's gleam hidden.

Suddenly Glenda's hand touched a boot, and it sent an electrical thrill sweeping through her. She swallowed the breath in her throat, her fingers tracing the rawhide of a lariat knotted around Hap Warren's legs and arms. She found the slip-knot finally and tugged at it with all her strength. It began to give, slowly at first and then, as she strained at it, more swiftly.

They had used Hap's neckcloth as a gag. Hap, flexing his arms, tore that away the next instant.

"Glenda, sweetheart!" His voice was unsteady, vibrant with emotion.

She knelt beside him.

"Quiet! They're coming for you—any minute! Oh, Hap! You—I—"

His arm went around her and for a wild instant Glenda forgot the terror in her heart. Again she felt his breath in her russet hair, the magic of his nearness.

"You found me!" he whispered. "I'd just about run out of prayers, too! They were going to shoot me and dump me in the ravine!"

He stopped speaking and Glenda went tensely rigid. From some distance away slow footfalls broke out on the cave's floor. A flickering torch of driftwood made a feeble speck of approaching light. Glenda drew back apprehensively. Hardly breathing, she waited while the steps came closer and closer.

They were the most suspenseful seconds she had ever experienced. Hap somewhere in the blackness, awaiting the coming of doom! She, crouched nervelessly, trying to control her breathing!

The light of the torch danced along the floor. The man who held it had reached them. Glenda couldn't see exactly what happened then, because Hap went into action with a pantherlike lunge. He must have got a hand over the man's mouth. A smothered oath ended in a strangled gasp. Then came the sound of a blow, a grunt, and she had the impression of Hap dragging the man's gun out of its holster.

He straightened up while Glenda retrieved the flickering torch from the cave's floor. Once more Hap's arm went around her, steady now and strong.

"This is the chance!" He kept his voice a whisper so that no echoes would warn those outside. "Stay close, and don't worry!"

She felt his lips brush her hair an instant before they started toward the cave's entrance. Around a cliff of rock and to the opening on the cleared space, Glenda followed Hap, her hands clenched and her nerves vibrant.

The gleam of the fire dazzled her. Hap stepped away from her and his slow tone cut the quiet like a knife:

"Start reaching! All three of you! You're covered, and I'll throw lead if you make a wrong move!"

Over his shoulder Glenda saw the looks on the dark faces of Braden and his two companions. An almost comic mixture of surprise, fear and rage contorted the countenances. But their hands went up quickly as Hap moved out, his gun glinting.

"Get their weapons, Glenda! Don't be afraid. I'll drop the first one who lowers his paws!"

Half-drunk, Braden gaped at Glenda as she hurried to obey. He stared at her witlessly, as if she were some apparition born of his disordered fancies. She yanked his twin guns clear of his decorated belt and went on to the other two men.

Hap nodded approval.

"Good! Now head for the cut. Their horses are out there. Get them ready—we're leaving!" He laughed shortly. "We'll take all four of their horses!"

ANOTHER few minutes and Glenda, in the saddle of one of the paint ponies, watched Hap scramble up the cut. She still clutched the guns she had taken from the men at the cave's entrance. Hap vaulted into the saddle of a rangy little brown mustang and gathered up the bridle reins of the other two animals. Glenda started toward the high ground above where she had left her sorrel tied to the cottonwood.

Somehow it was like emerging from a bad dream when, at last, they were out in the open, under the stars and the saffron moon.

Now, across the range in the distance, she caught sight of riders. The deputies! But minutes too late. She spoke to Hap as he leaned to untie the sorrel. He shook his head.

"Can't stop! The big business is still ahead! We'll turn these horses loose and get going—fast!"

Glenda checked the rush of questions surging to her lips. She dug a heel into the sor-

rel's flank, letting him spring away to match the pace of Hap's mount. Together they dashed over the range, riding toward the Bar X O!

Near the end of the lane that led to the big ranchhouse, she pulled her pony to a stop. Hap slid out of saddle and reached to help her down. Several lighted windows made yellow oblongs in the night where the big house loomed. Hap, his hand on her rounded arm, started toward it.

To the left, the bunkhouse was in complete darkness, the blacksmith's shop a gloomy bulk, the barns and corrals shapes of shadow. Glenda breathed in the cloying scent of honeysuckle, growing thickly along the porch where the deep pink blossoms of bitterroot made the air heavy with their own perfume.

The screen door was shut, but unhooked. So many times in the past Glenda had gone through it. But never before under such dramatic circumstances. Cautioning quiet, Hap eased the door open and they stepped into the wide main hall.

The living room was to the left. Lamplight gushed softly out. As Hap drew toward it warily, Glenda saw Clinton Starbuck hunched in a chair before the same dull-rubbed desk her father had used for so many years.

Hap quickened his quiet steps. Two long strides took him into the room, three more carried him across it. Starbuck saw him and jerked his head up in alarm. One clawlike hand reached toward a half-open drawer, but dropped away as Hap's gun leveled.

"Keep away from that drawer, Starbuck!" Hap's voice was like ice. "I'll handle the shooting irons—from here on!"

Clinton Starbuck sank deeper into the chair. His pale eyes, wide and terror-stricken, peered from the tall cowboy before him to Glenda who came slowly in from the hall.

He twisted his small mouth as he tried to find his voice. It finally came, fluty and thin.

"What—what's the meanin' of this? Get off my property and stay off! I'll have the law on you, on both of you!"

"*Your* property!" Hap laughed. "And you'll have the law on *me!* Don't be comical, Starbuck! I've got you dead to rights. I know all about how you fixed things with the Sanford girl to lead me into a trap, to take me for a buggy ride to Echo Cave where your killers were waiting. You'd lent Rita's old man money and they had to do what you wanted. Right into a trap so Braden could shoot me and leave me for the vultures! But you didn't count on it that Rita was not a killer, too! She got away—and so did I!"

Starbuck's pinched face whitened, as he tried hard to sneer.

"You're crazy! I never did no such thing!"

Hap stepped closer. "Starbuck, you're roped and thrown! You haven't got a chance. You were all set to sell the Bar X O to Burke Conover—he's been out here twice—but whether you sell or not is up to Glenda, since it's her ranch!"

Glenda clamped her teeth down on the exclamation rising to her lips. She pressed a hand over her pounding heart. Starbuck lowered his head, his skinny hands trembling on the smooth surface of the desk. The eyes, under their crepey lids, focused fully on Hap Warren.

"Her ranch? What are you tryin' to do? Pull some trick on me?"

"You attended to all the tricks, after Sam Allen died!" Hap's tone was like steel. "While I was out Wyoming way I ran across a couple of pokes who used to work down here. They knew quite a bit about a party named Shelvy, Ed Shelvy. What they told me sounded so interesting I took time out and went up to Chicago. I saw Shelvy—in jail there!"

STARBUCK'S hands stopped moving. His mouth opened, but no words came. His breathing quickened to a spasmodic wheeze. As if fascinated by what he heard, he stared at the man before him.

"I had a talk with Shelvy," Hap continued in his slow, easy drawl. "He's serving six years—for forgery. On account of your double-crossing him it didn't take too much persuading on my part to get him to tell his story."

Starbuck's face turned ashen in the lamplight. He made a final attempt to pull himself together, to snarl vituperously. But his voice was choked and dead.

"It's a frame-up!"

"It was, but it isn't any more," Hap corrected. "Shelvy signed a full confession. How you paid him to fake some notes, forge notes Allen was supposed to have given you for loans you made him from time to time. Notes that took the ranch away from Glenda, notes that are going to put you away for a long time, Starbuck! You'd heard I'd been in Chicago. Conover must have told you I'd seen Shelvy and you got scared and planned to do something about it."

With amazing speed Starbuck's hand dipped into the half-open drawer. A gun came out of it at the same minute Hap flung himself across the desk. The shot that followed sent pounding echoes through the room and tore a hole in the raftered ceiling.

Again Starbuck squeezed the trigger, but Hap had him in the next breath. The second shot went wild, burrowing into the bookcase. Hap wrenched the Colt out of the skinny fingers that gripped it and got a throatlock on the man's pipestem neck.

Slowly, Hap dragged Starbuck up and over the desk, throttling him until his ashen-gray face began to turn purple.

Glenda ran forward.

"Hap! *No!* Don't kill him!"

Almost reluctantly, Hap let the man go. Starbuck collapsed to his knees and fell on the floor. Hap grabbed him by the back of his coat and yanked him erect. He shoved him into a chair and wheeled around, his eyes suddenly losing the dangerous fire blazing in their depths.

"We'll take him in ourselves, and save Crosby the trouble!"

But Glenda didn't hear. Hap's arms were around her, she was safe in their circle and outside the Bar X O hands, aroused by the double shots, were coming up the lane. Glenda paid no attention to their voices or approaching footsteps.

At that minute all of the old rapture came flooding back to her in a singing tide. She was in the arms of the man she loved, everything had righted itself, and tomorrow and all the other tomorrows—hers and Hap's—stretched before them, golden with promise.

"... Your ranch," she heard Hap say.

On tiptoe, Glenda closed her sea-colored eyes for his kiss while she clung to him ecstatically.

"Not my ranch, darling!" she whispered, happily. "Our ranch!"

Romance Rides the Range Next Issue!

JULIA MILTON of the Running M wouldn't let any man rule her—not even the man to whom she was engaged. Her independent spirit is what enables her to uncover a vicious range conspiracy in HER HEART RIDES HOME, a fascinating complete romantic novelet featured next issue.

* * * *

MEET Sheila Benton—the WANTED WOMAN in the thrilling complete novelet of that name by Syl MacDowell next issue! As the result of a cattleman-sheepman fracas, in which her brother takes part, Sheila is arrested and jailed—but it turns out that Cupid holds the keys to her prison!

* * * *

ANOTHER novelet you'll enjoy is ANN OF THE BAR F, by Harold F. Cruickshank—a romance in which a question of water rights is the springboard for a series of enthralling events which lead the heroine to love!

* * * *

FOR the lighter touch, we recommend LEGAL TENDERFOOT, Joe Archibald's next Hattie Pringle howler. In addition, there will be many other stories and features to delight you in our next gala number!

The gun in Hattie's fist went off and the cigar in Fergus Cramby's mouth jumped

Butterfly Rustlers

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Hattie is promoting a romance, when somebody promotes a robbery —and the Law promotes her would-be bridegroom into a hoosegow!

MRS. HATTIE PRINGLE got out of her Model T three miles out of Milldew, Montana, and covetly appraised a few acres of real estate consisting of approximately four acres of level ground and ten acres of slope. It stretched down from a wall of timber at very close to a forty-five degree angle.

"Yep it is perfect fer what I'm thinkin' about," she muttered. "No good fer cattle as if they kep' grazin' on that hillside they'd have two long legs and two short ones. Would not take much to build wooden seats along the bank and all the folks could look right down on the bandstand. Milldew Ampratheatre of Music. Might even git a simps-

phony to come and play."

A buckboard drove up and a very gaunt individual with a sharp nose and eyes as calculating as a chicken-hawk's jumped to the ground.

He strolled over to where Hattie was cogitating.

"Wastin' yore time, you ole over-stuffed railbird," he said, lighting a long brown cigar.

"You!" Hattie sniffed, holding her nose. "I was sure I smelled somethin', Cramby. What you oglin' this place fer?"

"Free country, ain't it, you bowl of taller? I am lookin' out fer the interests of the tannin' company that wants to git set up here. Wind generally blows toward Milldew from here. I figger, oncet they start tannin' hides, a lot of real estate could be bought cheap in yore one-bronc town."

"Don't cross no bridges until you come to a river, you human corkscrew!" Hattie snapped. "Got as much chance as anybody to pick up this property, Cramby."

"You ain't got enough to outbid my associates, Hattie." The mayor of New Eden grinned. "Seems like a lot of New Eden residents'll back 'em up with extree dinero to boot. When Norby Juke puts it up to the highest bidder, you better stay home and not waste yore chicken-feed, tinhorn."

"Who says Norby'll sell, huh?" Hattie yipped.

"You more loco'n usual today?" Fergus Cramby scoffed. "In just three months he'll be of age and if he ain't married at the age of twenty-one, this property goes up fer auction. Conditions of his Uncle's will, yep. Might git my associates to think over addin' a subsidirary, as when they peel the hides offen the animals, they got hoofs an' horns lef', huh? That's what glue is made of. Hah, you ain't thinkin' of findin' Norby a wife? You got as much chance of findin' a rabbit to set up housekeepin' with a diamondback."

"Nothin's impossible, Fergus Cramby," Hattie said. "Somebody married you, didn't they? And you a homely double-dealin' ol' gopher. If somebody picked you and two eels up at the same time, you'd slip through their fingers first."

"If I warn't a gentleman, I'd slap yore sassy face!" Mayor Cramby retorted.

Instead, he brought a boot down hard in the mud puddle—stagnant water sprayed Hattie's taffeta dress and filled one of her eyes.

CRAMBY had nearly got to his buckboard but the reticule Hattie threw hit the off-horse on the rump. It jumped away from there, taking its mate with it, and the mayor of New Eden jumped aboard a wagon that was not there and landed on the seat of his pants in the middle of the road.

"Nice day fer a walk, huh?" Hattie said as she retrieved her warbag. "You old mangy political fraud!"

"You'll rue this day!" Cramby choked out.

"Horse collars!" Hattie said, and hurried to her Model T.

When she got back to Milldew and puffed her way to her office she found Judge Tolliver sitting in her chair, biting his knuckles.

"They would taste better if you put mustard on 'em first," Hattie sniffed. "Last time I fergot to lock my door and come back I found a rattler and a night crawler had got in. What's bitin' you besides yourself, huh?"

Tolliver groaned. "That tannin' factory, Hattie. The houses on the west side are my property and they'll git the first smells. I'll be ruint. Milldew'll be extink!"

"It will smell worse than that," Hattie admitted. "But no auction has took place yet Judge."

Judge Tolliver studied Hattie's face for a second, then shook his head until his glasses fell off.

"Nope, not even you could git a wife fer Norby. Own up."

"Look, you half-brother to a wayward burrer," Hattie yelped. "I have somethin' inside me noggin besides cupcustard. Don't tell me what I can't do!"

"You been too danged cocky," Tolliver said. "Pride goeth before the fall."

"And a bride goes before the fall." Hattie grinned. "Giss I'm still pretty sharp, huh?"

"We better organize a syndicate and try an' raise more legal tender than Cramby's bunch of polecats," Judge Tolliver yipped. "That Norby knows if he stays a bachelor he kin git rich playin' both towns ag'in the middle."

"*H-m-m!*" Hattie was thoughtful. "If only one hombre played chess in six counties and was dyin' fer a partner, and one come along, Judge, wouldn't they git to be great pards, huh?"

"Time t' go," Tolliver sniffed. "You are gittin' a relapse from the last sunstroke. I see we got no chance!"

"The Lord is with me," Hattie fired at the judge as he made his exit. "Music culture

ag'in smokin' cowskins."

Hattie had to sit a long time and think things over before she got into her skitter-buggy and drove out to the Juke place.

Norby's father was sitting in the shade of an old apple tree, sipping elderberry wine.

"Afternoon, Jobe," Hattie grinned. "Where's Norby? Never mind, I see him chastin' acrost that field with a net."

"Yep. Norby's set on gittin' him a *Papilio Glaucus* t' day, Hattie."

"Jobe, me left ear has been botherin' me of late," Hattie gulped. "Drive by ag'in an' a little slower, huh? You could call to Norby and tell him he could save time by comin' up here now. Me innards is full of butterflies. Norby ought to settle down, Jobe."

"Got no more use fer gals than a centypede has fer a couple of more legs, ma'am," Jobe said. "Say, you ain't figgerin' on settin' the love bug on him, huh?"

"If Cupid was only a butterfly now," Hattie said. "One of them sapilio glucoses, it'd be a cinch."

"Reckon," Jobe laughed. "No use, Hattie. Have a slug of elderberry quick, 'fore Norby gits back. He'd cuss me out fer drinkin' the brew of Tophet."

"No thanks," Hattie groaned.

She took one look at Norby vaulting a brook in the distance, and then waddled over to her Model T.

Four miles from the Juke place, Hattie, driving aimlessly, chanced to pass the old Hunker homestead, and was surprised to see a big freight wagon in the yard, a pile of furniture, two women and a man.

"I'm a pink-shelled snappin' turtle if somebody ain't movin' in."

Hattie grinned, and drove over to the little clapboard house flanked by a pair of droopy looking outbuildings. An hombre, thin as an owlhoot's alibi, tipped his hat as she put on the brakes.

"Howdy, ma'am. Figger you're our first visitor. I'm Bashan Lumpitt, and this is my wife, Essie, and my datter, Leony. We aim to raise truck and poultry here."

"Glad to meet yuh," Hattie said. "I'm Hattie Pringle."

HATTIE wasted little time with Bashan and his spouse. Leona consumed her interest. She was a blonde—a wistful maid of about twenty summers and she filled her blue cotton dress out very nicely where it should be filled out. Leona had freckles on her upturned nose and her eyes were blue and as round as a pair of half-dollars.

Swiftly, Hattie's mental transmission shifted gears and went into high. Leona seemed to be the intellectual type even though she might not be working at it.

There was a place in New Eden called Schlepp's Fairyland. It was a second-hand store where it was said a body could purchase anything from a pinhead on which had been engraved the Gettysburg address to a mother-of-pearl totem pole.

"Wish you luck, Bashan," Hattie said. "Drop in ag'in after you're settled. Got to go to New Eden."

An hour later, Hattie entered Schlepp's store. She tripped over a Sioux war drum, nearly lost part of her ear when she moved too close to a parrot's perch.

Schlepp was a little rotund merchant with a beard and heavy spectacles.

"Lookin' fer somethin' special, ma'am?"

"You ain't kiddin'," Hattie sniffed. "Bet you five simoleons you ain't got it, neither."

"It's a bet, ma'am. Name your poison."

"Butterflies," Hattie said. "Dried ones stuck to a board or somethin'."

"Hee-hee!" Schlepp laughed and shuffled to the back of the store. He returned with a big dusty book, each page of same being more of a shallow flat paper box. In each were samples of mummified *lepidoptera*. "Nobody never stumped me yet, nope."

"Gobs in Heaven!" Hattie choked out. "How much, huh?"

"Hun'red dollars," Schlepp said. "Cheap at the price. Five extree fer the bet I made."

Hattie grinned. "Wrap it up, Schlepp."

A few minutes later she emerged from Schlepp's Fairyland and got into her skitter-buggy. The contraption balked like an arthritic burro. Hattie kept giving it spark and stepping on the accelerator but it remained as cold as a stepmother's kiss.

"Bushwash!" Hattie said, and got out and toddled three blocks to a garage. A mechanic returned with her and lifted the Model T's hood, poked into the mechanical viscera for a few moments.

"Oh, oh!" the flivver veterinary said. "Busted gasline, ma'am. Take couple of hours to fix it."

"Awright." Hattie sighed. "I'll kill the time in a movie. What's playin' at The Music Box?"

"A great pitcher, ma'am. 'Crime Never Plays!' "

Hattie, packing her precious collection, turtled over to New Eden's showhouse and bought a ticket. The scenario was about an innocent hombre getting mixed up in a hold-up and he was saved at the crucial moment by a cow-eyed heroine who had rounded up evidence against the real badman.

"Should of hung him anyways," Hattie growled as she made her exit. "Should of lynched the whole cast. I sure hope that Model T is fixed."

It was. Hattie returned to Milldew and quickly went to her office and stowed her book away in a drawer of her big desk.

At ten o'clock the next morning she drove into Jobe Juke's yard and found Norby sitting on the porch of the house, mending a butterfly net. Norby nodded briefly. Norby never talked much unless it was about butterflies. Hattie extricated her portly chassis from behind the wheel and sauntered up to the porch. She settled into the other chair and remarked:

"Nice day, Norby."

"Kinda cool, ma'am. Need more sunshine to catch them butterflies."

"Speakin' of butterflies, I figger you ain't the only person I know who saves 'em up," Hattie said, and kicked off her right shoe to satisfy a protesting corn.

"Huh?"

"Yep. New gal moved in to the Hunker place. Name is Leona Lumpitt. Never saw sech a collection of defunk moths, Norby."

"Really?"

"I ain't just talkin' fer the fun of it," Hattie sniffed. "Look, Norby, how about me pickin' you up—say—about Thursday night and we'll pay a call on the gal."

"I sure would like that, Mrs. Pringle. Oh, I been waitin' fer somebody who was my affinity in that way. And a gal at that. Is she good lookin'?"

"She ain't no hag," Hattie said. "Well, I figgered you'd like to hear. Got to git me stumps movin', Norby. Until Thursday night, then."

PLAINLY Norby was enthusiastic.

"I'll be ready," he said.

"I better be—I mean you," Hattie grinned. "What d'yuh make butterfly nets out of, Norby?"

"I use gauze from the drug store," Norby said. "Ain't what most butterfly hunters use, but I don't take no chances they'll bust their pretty wings in too much nettin'."

"Yeah?" Hattie said. "Well, *adios*, Norby."

Hattie drove back to town, fast. She stopped at the drug store and purchased yards of gauze. She went over to her office and picked up the purchase she had made in New Eden. Then she drove the Model T out to the Lumpitt layout.

Bashan and his helpmate were busy replacing glass in the kitchen windows. Leona was in the parlor putting antimacassars on the over-stuffed chairs.

"Am I intrudin', dearie?" Hattie asked. Leona spun around and flicked loose strands of corn-colored hair out of her eyes. "Just dropped by because I figgered you might need some help."

"You are welcome, I'm sure," Leona said, and folded herself into a chair.

"You caught the eye of somebody I know already, Leona," Hattie said. "Ast me who the pretty maid was that moved in here."

"He did?" Leona yelped. "I mean—well, no girl would—"

"That's right. Feller named Norby Jukes. A great ketch, Leona if—huh! Here I go hintin' you might be interested in gittin' married! Forgit it, Leona."

"Maybe I don't want to, ma'am. All girls my age should be thinkin' of marriage."

Hattie pulled her chair closer to Leona's, took off her old hat and slipped out of her shoes.

"Now Norby ain't like most fellers and you got to set yore cap just the right way to git him. I figger I know the proper percedure as there's only one. It ain't through his food, Leona. Here's what . . ."

Hattie talked for nearly fifteen minutes without taking a breath.

"But I don't know nothin' about butterflies," Leona said.

"What did Columbus know about findin' America before he set out, dearie?" Hattie sniffed. "In a couple of hours we kin learn all we need to learn about them moths. I got a *Cyclopedicer Brittanicar* home. And got your collection all fixed, and we'll git a hoe handle and a small barrel hoop and take the gauze and make a net. Don't tell me we have to practise to chaste butterflies."

"Oh, I'll do it, Mrs. Pringle." Leona giggled. "I'm so excited. I feel—so—bold, though!"

"Nobody never got a husband runnin' away from men," Hattie said. "Be an awful skimpy population in the United States if

the gals didn't do more'n their share of the grabbin', huh? You tell yore folks we're goin' to my house fer awhile, Leona."

Three days later, Hattie Pringle drove into the Lumpitt yard with Norby Juke. Just as Hattie went through the gate, she pointed.

"Look, Norby," she yipped. "She's chastin' one!"

Norby looked. He saw a long-legged maid hurdle a short board fence and make a pass at something with a net.

"Maybe she has discovered a *basilarchia archippus,* ma'am," he said. "I been tryin' to hook onto that species."

Hattie blinked.

"Maybe she did. Are they dangerous when cornered? I think she's got a *agly antelopa* pinned up, too."

"You mean an *aglais antiopa,* don't you, Mrs. Pringle?"

"Do I? Maybe you're right, Norby. Maybe it was a *nux vomica,* fer all I know about them things."

Hattie drove past the house and along a bumpy road that led to a pasture. Leona came through a little clump of jackpine like a tired gazelle and made another pass with the net.

"Oh!" she said, knowing it was the maidenly thing to do. "Oh, this is most embarassin'."

"Leona, meet Norby Juke," Hattie said. "Norby, this is Leona Lumpitt."

Norby lifted his derby hat.

"The pleasure sure is 'all mine, Miss Lumpitt."

"It ain't neither," the girl said and snickered. "I am sure it is mostly mine."

"I wouldn't say that," Norby blurted out. "Like I said, the pleasure—"

"Awright," Hattie injected. "Make up your minds. You git that specimen, Leona?"

"Oh, I just missed it. I'm sure it was a *heliconius charithonia!*"

"It was?" Norby yelped. "Come on, Leona. Gimme that net! Why—what do you know, Mrs. Pringle? She uses the same kind of net I do."

HE TOOK the net out of Leona's hand, caught her by the sleeve with his free paw and headed across country.

Hattie went to her Model T and sat down to wait.

"I must be gittin' soft in me noodle," she grunted. "First thing I know I will be chastin' squirrels or cuttin' out paper dolls meself. Some romance, yep. The love-birdies chastin' *epluribus unums* and *ipso factonias.* Why didn't somebody beside Eyetalians name butterflies?"

Hattie waited. The sun got lower in the sky. Dusk began to move in to lay plans for the night.

"Looks like they got lost," Hattie gulped. "Bushwash! I better try and find 'em. I'll go towards Sugarloaf and try to cut their sign."

Hattie crossed a pasture, spent ten minutes getting her bulk through a rail fence, then wheezed laboriously across a stretch of terrain studded with boulders and stunted oak. She came to a clump of willows and then she stopped.

Leona Lumpitt and Norby Juke were seated on a fallen tree that spanned a tributary of Goose Creek. Hattie was certain she could not have inserted a maple leaf between them.

"I been lookin' all my life fer a affinity, Leona," Norby was saying. "Somebody like you who must of been born just fer me. How many people like you and me are both interested in studyin' *lepidoptera,* huh? Our paths had to cross, my dear one. We was meant fer each other, and no mistake. When will we git married?"

"I got to have a li'l time to think, Norby," Leona said, her pipes a little clogged. "We just met today. Oh, I am sure you are the one fer me. Just give me until tomorrer to quiet myself down, Norby."

"Of courst, my sweet li'l butterfly," Norby cooed. "How about a kiss, huh?"

"You sure I should?"

"Why not, fer Heaven's sake!"

"Who said that, Norby?" Leona gasped and nearly hopped off the log and into the creek.

"Who's there? Norby croaked.

"Just us *basilica archipelligoes,*" Hattie whispered to herself and got away from there undetected.

Hattie managed to reach the Model T a few moments before Leona and Norby hove into view. She waxed indignant when she learned that somebody had been spying on their magic moment.

"The dirty eavesdropper," she yipped indignantly. "It'll serve the polecat right if he steps into a bear trap on the way home."

"Stop by my house, Hattie," Leona said. "I want to show Norby my collection."

When Norby looked at the array of defunct butterflies he was hooked for life. His

eyes bugged out and his knees shook under him.

"No wonder she's a li'il thin, Norby," Hattie remarked. "She worked a lot of meat offen her bones corralin' them *lopidepteras.*"

"A sulphur-colored one, ma'am," Norby gulped. "A *eurymus philodice.*"

"I never would of believed it," Hattie sighed. "You could knock me over with a butterfly, Norby. Well, I figger we better be goin'."

"Kin I call tomorrer night, Leona?"

"Of courst, Norby. Who else?"

The news spread through Milldew the next morning. By midafternoon the grapevine of chatter crept into New Eden and took root. Inside of a week, Norby had committed himself to the limit. Mayor Fergus Cramby perspired copiously and summoned a lackey named Bitsy Bogart.

"Hattie's done it ag'in, Bitsy," Cramby rasped. "I don't know how. I figger she could even ride a broom, that old she buzzard. Figger you know what our associates'll think if we don't grab that property from 'em, huh? And the dinero we'll lose! Somethin' has to be done, Bitsy."

"You want dis Juke character killed, Mayor?"

Cramby winced.

"Stop bein' so bloodthirsty, Bitsy," he growled. "Use some finesse on this one."

"Are they anythin' like brass knuckles?" Bitsy wanted to know.

He was an unprepossessing taxpayer—an exile from the effete East, and he had hardly more than an inch of clearance between his hair-line and eyebrows. One of his ears had been cauliflowered and his nose had never taken its present shape from tripping over a church step. Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

"Got an idea, Mayor. A natural! Just leave everythin' to me, as the wayward nephew said to the old uncle who was passin' out in a four-poster."

"Very well, Bitsy. Go ahead," Cramby said. "Maybe I'll reward you handsomely."

"You will, awright," Bitsy snapped, and departed.

JUDGE TOLLIVER and three representative citizens stopped by to congratulate Hattie. She was very modest about it.

"Wa'n't nothin'," Hattie scoffed. "Hope it ain't a butterfly-by-night romance, Judge. Looks in the old sack, though, I'll admit."

"Say, Hattie," Judge Tolliver said, when the others had gone. "Like to borrer a six-gun fer awhile. Expeck to carry a thousan' dollars to Three Falls any day now. Legacy fer a feller over there that's got to be twenty-one. His grandma left it in escrow and I need pertection."

"Sure, but don't shoot yourself, Judge," Hattie said.

"Won't even load it. Just to scare folks," Tolliver said. You sure keep savin' Milldew's hide, Hattie."

"Long as Cramby don't git to tan it, Judge."

Hattie slept like a log that night and it was just as well for events which were to give her plenty of insomnia were transpiring. The course of true love hit a road that was a complete washout and got bogged down. Norby Juke arrived at her office an hour after she had opened her mail and he looked as withered as one of his choice pin-up butterflies.

"Nothin' could be that bad," Hattie opined, misgivings needling her lumbar regions. "Or could it? Take off your lid and spill it, Norby."

"She throwed me over, Hattie."

"Huh?" Hattie took her feet off the desk and they fell to the floor with a thud. "Leona? You kiddin', Norby?"

"Nope. Wanted me to take a drink of elderberry wine. Wanted me to go to the movies. They're sinful, Hattie."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Yep, she says she don't marry nobody who can't have fun. A snort or two, she says, puts red corpuskles in people's veins. Ain't sittin' every night all her life talkin' about butterflies and stickin' pins in 'em, she says. Always said women was wild, Hattie. They're plumb flighty. I love her too. Where could I ever git another gal who hunts butterflies? I'll end it all. I'll do somethin' desperate!"

"Keep your voice down, Norby. They can hear you all the way t' New Eden." Hattie sniffed. "Why, you li'l narrer minded panty-waist! All you got to do is take a snort of elderberry and go and see a installment of the Perils of Prairiedog Range and she's yourn."

"Ain't worth the awful price," Norby said. "Well, thanks fer everythin', Mrs. Pringle. I'll go far, far away."

"You got carfare, Norby?"

"You'll lend me some, huh? I only has a dollar and eleven cents. Give you collateral. Own some lots."

"You can't touch 'em lest you're a married man, Norby," Hattie groaned. "Oh, git out of here!"

Judge Tolliver and several interested citizens swarmed into Hattie's office and withdrew their congratulations. They had her know that she was about half as bright as an addled goose and was slipping faster than a log going down a greased chute. Hattie chased them all as far as the street and got into her Model T and rushed over to see Leona Lumpitt.

"Imagine it, Hattie?" Leona sniffed. "I ought to have known a butterfly hunter was missin' some wheels. That goody-goody sissy! I like movies at least twice a week and I need elderberry wine to make blood, the doctor says. Anyways, I like the boot I git out of it. Would you marry a feller like Norby?"

"I won't answer that," Hattie said. "It wa'n't fair. Well, you most likely'll find somebody sometime Leona."

"I'm sure of it," Leona said. "A man winked at me about an hour ago in front of the post-office. He was all dressed up with a gray derby hat and plaid vest. If only his nose wasn't so crooked!"

"Ah, I can smell him, Hattie yelped. "No hombre fits that description but Bitsy Bogart, Leona. That lobo is poison, so stay away from him, dearie. Well, I'm goin' out to hunt me a cliff. I bet I make a awful splat when I hit."

"I could die, too," Leona said weepily. "I wish Norby would do somethin' awful so's I could hate him. If he didn't have such deep brown eyes and nice soft curly hair, I could —fergit—him!"

"We'll give Norby a coupla weeks to git some he-man vices," Hattie said as she departed. "Better hang on to the butterfly net, Leona."

WOE begets woe. Just forty-eight hours later, Judge Tolliver staggered into the Milldew police station with his hat in his hand for the simple reason it would not fit over the big igloo he had on his head.

"I been robbed! I took a short cut through the alley next to the lumber yard on my way home and somebody drygulched me and stole a thousan' dollars I had on me—that I was t' take to Three—Falls tomorrer. I didn't want to leave it in my old safe overnight. And—well, it's gone. Git a posse together. Oh, my poor old head!"

Milldew's limbs of the law snapped into it and hurried to the scene of the holdup. Here they found a dead butterfly, with a pin sticking in it, in an envelope.

Hattie took a gander at the clue and nearly swooned.

"It's a *basilica antelopia,* too," she gulped. "Only two people—Oh, Gobs!"

Artie Moon, Milldew's chief of police, nodded.

"Norby Juke!" he said. "Heard him yelp he would do somethin' desperate the other day. Guess everybody heard the cuss. We better go an' make the arrest, Hattie."

"I'll go along and help," Hattie snapped. "Hope he resists arrest as I'll tear offen one of his legs an' beat him into a comma with it."

Norby Juke was not at home when the Model T loaded with indignant law enforcement officers arrived.

"That clinches it," Artie Moon said.

Norby came back ten minutes later, his butterfly net over his shoulder. Hattie blocked his way as he stepped up to the porch. "Well, Norby, see if you ain't lost a butterfly that ain't been dead too long. One of them sulphur-colored ones. Never mind, as we found it where you held up the judge and robbed him of a thousan' dollars."

"Wha-a-a-at?"

"Don't act so surprised," Hattie sniffed. "Can't drink elderberry wine or go to the movies, but you can assault a old man and rob him. You're the worst two-faced snippity-snip I ever did see."

"I am innercent!" Norby choked out.

"Awright, tell it to a jury," Artie Moon said. "Load him in, fellers."

The evidence continued to build up against Norby. Folks said they had heard him threaten to do something desperate. The ticket man at the railroad station said Norby was asking the price of the fare to New York City only two hours before the stickup. The butterfly was enough evidence to convince even the most skeptical.

After Norby had been tossed into a cell, Hattie dragged her old frame up the stairs to her office and fell into her chair.

"Yep, it is the still water that runs deep, Pete," she gulped at the picture hanging on the wall. "Had to be somethin' wrong with a

hombre who wouldn't take a snort now an' then. Well, Pete, they got me over a barrel which is on the lip of Niagara. I can smell them hides tannin' now and can see a exodus which will put the one in the Bible in the shade. I guess I stuck me snoot out too far once too often."

Hattie sighed deeply and wondered if she should not start liquidating her property.

"All because of a sissy-pants who wouldn't take a snort of elderberry or see a movin' pitcher—er—see a movin' pitcher!"

Hattie fell forward in her chair and brought the palms of her hands down against the top of her desk, and Pete's picture shook on the wall.

"Oh, what a mush-head I almost was! In that pitcher at the Music Box, the poor innercent hero was a stamp collector and they foun' a stamp from Castoria or some such country in Europe at the scene of the crime. And the holdup took place in a dark alley, too, an' folks heard the hero say he was goin' to do somethin' awful because Dolores Del Monte's love was coolin'."

Hattie got up and walked over to the picture that hung on the wall. There was a six-gun in a holster nearby. She removed the shooting-iron took it to her desk and loaded it with slugs.

"Pete, there's some hombres can't think with what they got in their own noggins. They are copy cats! Stick with me tonight, you old stewpot, as violence has broke out once more in the West."

And Hattie walked out of her office, down the stairs, and got into her Model T and drove toward New Eden.

It was a dark night in New Eden. There was a light in a certain window of a big box-like structure and Hattie ascended a flight of stairs as silently and as cautiously as sixty pounds overweight would allow. She tip-toed along a corridor and the boards under her feet squealed like a thousand mice, and soon she came to a door labeled, Fergus J. Cramby, C.P.A.

There were voices on the other side of the door. A safe door slammed shut. Hattie banged her knuckles against the door, and kept the six-gun poised.

AFTER a questioning silence, Cramby opened his office door a crack and Hattie hurled herself against the portal and carried herself, Mayor Cramby, and a big chair half the way across the room.

Bitsy Bogart had to jump quick to escape the offensive.

"What's the big idea, you bloated old buzzard?" Cramby yowled.

Bitsy pulled an ugly snub-nosed Betsy from his pocket and Hattie shot a hole through the crown of his gray derby. Bitsy tossed the gun away and Hattie backed up to the door, turned a key in a lock, then pocketed the key.

"C.P.A., huh?" Hattie yipped. "Coyotes Pertective Association, huh, Cramby? Now I figger I heard a safe snap shut just before I got in here, so just open it up, Cramby, and hand over that thousan' dollars Bitsy took from Judge Tolliver to frame Norby Juke!"

"You fergit I'm a mayor!" Cramby sputtered with great indignation. "You leave at once or I'll call the police."

"After I git through here, you won't be no mayor, not even a respeckable female jassack!" Hattie snapped. "I got five more shots left in me cannon and I use 'em all if you don't open up that safe, Cramby. Hurry up, Mayor. You can't never spend that dinero as it was marked!"

Mayor Cramby's chops assumed the tinge of an eye-shade, and Bitsy Bogart's teeth clicked together like a sprung bear-trap. Both nefarious citizens quickly ogled daggers at each other.

"Thought you was the brains," Bitsy yelped. "Why didn'—?"

"Shut your face!" Cramby screeched.

"Open that safe, Cramby," Hattie said. "I'm goin' to count to five. Then I leave two dead polecats and claim the bounty on 'em. You figger it out, Cramby. Easy to find a butterfly if you lay in ambush aroun' a butterfly bush. Bitsy here went to a movie called 'Crime Never Plays', at the Music Box in New Eden."

"What if I did?" Cramby's agent cried out in a voice that needed oiling.

"Shut up, Bitsy!" Cramby yowled.

"Two—three—four—"

"Won't do it!" Cramby choked out.

Bang!

The stub of a cold cigar disappeared as if by magic from the corner of the mayor's mouth. He jumped a foot in the air and when he came down, he was already crouched, ready to open the old iron safe.

Hattie, keeping Bitsy covered, moved in closer.

"Put the big envelope on the table when

you git it," she snapped. "It's brown and has ten one-hundred dollar bills in it."

Cramby swung the safe open, pulled out a fat envelope and slammed it onto a table.

"Well, well!"

Hattie grinned, and Bitsy made another bid. He made a dive for the snub-nosed persuader that was on the floor. A forty-five slug got there at the same time as his fingers and Bitsy screeched like a tormented Sioux and lifted his hand to count only three fingers and a thumb.

"Awright, now you both crooks git over there in the corner and keep your hands up!" Hattie said, and trotted to Cramby's rolltop desk and sat down.

There was a stub of a pencil near at hand and Hattie chuckled deep in her brisket. She ripped open the envelope and took the money out, worked swiftly with the pencil stub.

"Yep, Bitsy don't have much of a mind of his own, Cramby. Had to do it like in the movies. Happened to see that pitcher meself. Yep, all the legal tender is here. Maybe you didn't hear, you old bandit, but Judge Tolliver has had a elapse and might not be with us long. Then it'll be murder and you're sunk."

Bitsy made a sound like a pullet makes when it is about to have its neck wrung.

"I ain't takin' this alone, by cripes! Cramby hired me to do it. He was goin' to gimme a hundred dollars if—"

Mayor Fergus Cramby rushed at Bitsy and Hattie sat down in a chair and let him go, her six-gun very much on the alert.

Bitsy hit Cramby on the chin and Cramby staggered back to the wall where he reached for a big framed picture of Custer's Last Stand. He threw it. Bitsy did not duck quickly enough and there was a crash and Bitsy fell out of sight behind a table.

WHEN he got up, his head stuck through the picture. Hattie let out a shout as excited New Eden citizens smashed the door down.

He's a expert at framin', Cramby is, Bitsy!" she yelped.

"We heard it!" bawled the first taxpayer of New Eden to rush in. "Hattie, you'll git a medal fer the service to the town. Awright, Mayor. You are under arrest fer assault, robbery and collusions. Grab that city owlhoot, boys!"

[*Turn page*]

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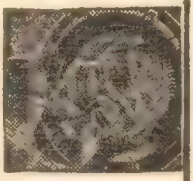

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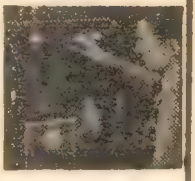

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Hattie grinned. "Nice evenin', aint it, Sheriff?"

Two hours later, in New Eden, Norby Juke emerged from durance vile. Hattie sent for Leona Lumpitt and then hied to the lobby of the Milldew House where she told all.

"But that money warn't marked," Judge Tolliver yipped, little the worse for his bash on the noggin.

"Not until I marked it," Hattie snickered. "Norby, you listen to me."

"Huh?"

"You listen to Hattie Pringle, Norby Juke," Leona said.

"If you had been mixin' in society like goin' to the movies or liftin' a couple in the bar here, you'd have had a alibi, Norby," Hattie said. "Nearly got you five years in the hoosegow, you li'l narrer-minded pupstart. Would they let you chaste butterflies there? And if I hadn't gone to one of them horrid movin' pitchers, where would you be now?"

"That's right," Norby said. "I been a awful fool, Hattie. From now on, I don't miss a pitcher here at the Bijou."

"Oh, Norby, you darlin'!" Leona fairly shrieked. She leaped at Norby and wrapped her long arms around his neck. "This calls for a celebration, Norby!"

"Yep, le's have a snort or two," Norby said.

Hattie led the way into the Milldew dining room. Two hours later, in the wee small hours, she watched Norby Juke leave the dining room with Leona. Norby had a chowder bowl over his head and wore a checkered table-cloth for a skirt. Norby sang:

"In the good old zummer ti-i-i-me—up a tree I want t' cl-i-i-imb—you'll be my hoopsy woopsy—hic—in the good o' shummer time!—Er—that'sh funny. Theresh a spotted rhinostrous in your auto, Mishish Pringle. And everythin'sh goin' 'round an 'round. Whe-e-e-e, we got a shirculatin lib'ary in Milldew!"

"Oh, Norby," Leona giggled. "You are a perfeck scream!"

"Well, I better git 'em home." Hattie was grinning. "That last snort I took was a beaut, Judge. See if the eyes on the li'l bird on me hat is crossed, huh? Oh Jennyveeve—swuh-heet Jennyveeve—"

"Which hat?" Tolliver gurgled and walked over to the water barrel at the corner of the hardware store and fell in.

"Thar she blows!" Hattie yipped as Tolliver's head appeared. "Ain't it been a whale of a day, huh?"

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 6)

famous as "Wolfers", known far and wide throughout the cattle country.

The King o' Trappers

One o' the best known and respected o' the lot was John Corbett. He was known as King o' Trappers. Corbett followed the traps for sixty years, and he never stopped studyin' the wolf all that time.

He knew the animal, his taste and habits, and he studied the wolf's cunning. He had constantly to devise new methods o' trappin', and invent new baits to fool the lobo.

No matter how well you may hide the trap under earth, the wolf won't go near it if he can smell a human bein', or see any sign that a human might have left.

Corbett used to tell a story 'bout how he sold some wolf bait to another trapper, bait he knew was good, but later the trapper come back to Corbett and told him the bait was worthless.

"Lemme see you set a trap with that bait," Corbett told the man. "Something's wrong, but it's not the bait."

So he watched the trapper carefully set some traps.

"That's as good as I could do," he told the trapper, "but I noticed you spittin' around the traps. That would keep any wolf away. The bait's all right, your work's all right. Cut out your tobacco spittin' and you'll catch 'em."

The trapper did as Corbett told him and he caught his wolves. "After that," John Corbett said, "he carried a bottle to spit in." Shows how careful o' scents you've got to be when trappin' cunnin' animals.

Corbett knew more about the wolf and its habits than anyone I ever saw. The wolf, he declared, don't have a single admirable quality, although it's as smart a animal as ever was, and a dangerous one.

He was speakin' o' the great gray wolf which is known accordin' to its locality, bein' called timber wolf, lobo, loafer, loper, or buffalo wolf. It's long shaggy coat takes on the color o' the country in which it ranges. Wolves around the Red River country have a reddish coat, while in countries where the

soil is gray the animals have gray coats. Young wolf pups are blackish brown, and look a heap like young dogs. They usually come in litters o' five.

How Big Is a Wolf?

How big is the lobo wolf?

Well, one o' full size is about two feet high at the shoulders, and has a body length of about four feet or so. The tail is fifteen inches or more in length.

The animal has powerful jaws and enormous strength, and teeth that can inflict terrible wounds, and is remarkably cunnin'. They hunt either singly, or in packs.

When huntin' in packs, as they did in bringin' down buffalo, they detach a beast from the herd, chase him until he is winded, then attack him on haunches and flanks, and drag him down. When the pack goes to work on him with those powerful teeth, he's a goner.

Treacherous and cruel, the wolf is the only known animal that habitually eats its own dead and ill, and devours the wounded. Both the weak and the wounded are quickly killed and eaten. When danger threatens, the wolf quickly abandons its offspring to save itself.

John Corbett was a mighty interestin' character, yes suh. He was not only King o' Trappers, he was known far and wide for his honesty, and he won respect wherever he went.

The Fiddlin' Trapper

He had one title, though, that always amused him. He was called the Fiddlin' Trapper. Folks got a notion he was a sort o' Pied Piper, charmin' the wolves to follow him like the children in the story followed the Pied Piper. He become so well known as a "fiddlin' trapper" that his fame began to take on a sort o' legendary quality.

"Folks seemed to think I charmed the wolves with my music," Corbett explained. "They told preposterous yarns about me. The truth was," he admitted, "I was lonesome, and I played to amuse myself."

Men followed him stealthily to watch him and try to discover his secret in charmin' the wolves with his fiddlin'. All they could ever see was a lone man playin' well-known tunes on his fiddle while Betty, his tame lobo, howled sorrowfully, like she was accompanyin' him.

"When I played," Corbett explained, "Betty howled, much as a dog will do when he hears the higher notes. Then I discovered that Betty's howls drew other wolves. I'd set my traps at night, then play, Betty would set up her howlin', and the wolves would come. I kept it a secret and let 'em tell as

[*Turn page*]

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many preposterous tales as they wished."

Corbett followed the traps most o' his life, and died in 1929. He lived to see the great state o' Texas spendin' seventy thousand dollars a year on predatory animal eradication and control, which is in addition to the sums spent by the Federal Government, counties, and individuals. Ranchmen pay generously to have predatory animals on their property killed off.

Corbett was a successful trapper, and as such made quite a bit o' money in his day. On one brief expedition alone, around Lamesa and Big Spring, he brought in one-hundred and sixteen gray wolves for which he received five dollars each. Two hundred and ten small gray wolves for which he was paid one dollar each, and two large loboes for which he received seventy-five dollars apiece. Also five puppies o' the lobo variety, gettin' fifty dollars each for them.

So, you see, John Corbett could make hisself a livin' with some left over for a rainy day, but, like so many humans, he didn't save that rainy-day portion, and so died with nothin' left in his declinin' years but his rich and varied memories o' the useful life he'd lived.

Well, everybody, watch out for wolves. They're sure bad medicine, on the range or the Park Avenue trails!

LETTERS FROM READERS

OLD fire-light shore is pretty with the dancing flames reflected on the leaves of them pines over yonder. Seems mighty good to have all you BRANDING FIRE CLUB members gathered around. Reckon we'll just go right ahead with the meetin' now yuh're all here, so let's get looking over all the mighty fine letters we been receivin'—and there shore is a heap of them.

Just seems that we never get room enough to print all the grand letters we keep gettin' all the time—leastwise not as soon as we would like. And for that reason we're gonna shorten the letters from all of you club members in order to get as many of them into this department as possible.

Which shore doesn't mean that there isn't still room for more members, so if there's some of yuh that ain't joined THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB yet, then get busy. You'll find the coupon in this department. All yuh've got to do is fill it in and mail it to us with a stamped, self-addressed envelope so we can send yore free membership card to you right away. There are no dues or fees and it's a mighty fine club for those who like the West.

And now let's get lookin' over the letters.

The first two are a bit unusual, so we're gonna speak about them right here and now. First, we're shore flattered at the trade Jack Keel made with those four cigarettes, and we hope that Ralph Fordney's mother finds them folks she is looking for so hard. Here goes—with the mail:

This is to say that on December 29th last I was in a Jap prison camp off Okinawa, and I noticed a little Jap guard on a box reading—the pictures of course—of the October issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES, and ventured to try and find out what kind of a magazine he was trying to read. So it turned out to be a genuine TRS right out of the States, and I traded four American cigarettes for it to the little Jap.

I am sure that I read every single word in that book before I let it get away from me. And then before I passed it on I tore out pages 108-9 so I could write you and members of the BRANDING FIRE CLUB about where I got their names. So please enroll me as a member. I have lived most of my life in the West and do like your stories and the way they are written. I am 26 years old, have black hair, gray-blue eyes, fair complexion, and love to travel and the great outdoors. My hobbies are a good horse, a good motorcycle and a good automobile and house-trailer. Keep up the good stories as I am back now where I can buy THRILLING RANCH STORIES when they hit the newsstands. Will appreciate hearing from anyone who cares to write.

Jack Keel.

320½ South 20th St., Birmingham, Alabama.

I am writing to you in behalf of my mother, Mrs. George S. White, 1300 S. 14th St., Burlington, Iowa. My mother, Mrs. White, has relatives by the name of Otto living in or around the following towns—Terra Alta, West Va., Cranesville, West Va. Anyone having any information concerning the above, my mother would be glad to hear from them. I enjoy reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES very much. I am enclosing application for membership card and will be proud to be a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. As I was injured a year ago in an auto accident all I can do at present is read and write.

Ralph Fordney.

337 Armitage Ave., Chicago 14, Ill.

I have been a reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES for nearly four years. I am 25 years old, 5 feet 9½ inches tall, have dark brown hair, brown eyes and weigh 150 lbs. My hobbies are dancing, horseback riding, roller skating and movies. I'll exchange snapshots and answer all letters.

Joy Holland.

P. O. Box 999, Oakdale, California.

My favorite hobbies are ice skating, horseback riding. I am a bachelor—never did smoke or drink. I am 5 feet 7 inches tall, weigh 140 lbs. and have brown hair and blue eyes. I used to live in Arizona. I'd love to hear from pen pals of all ages.

George Severs.

1407 Tamm Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

[*Turn page*]

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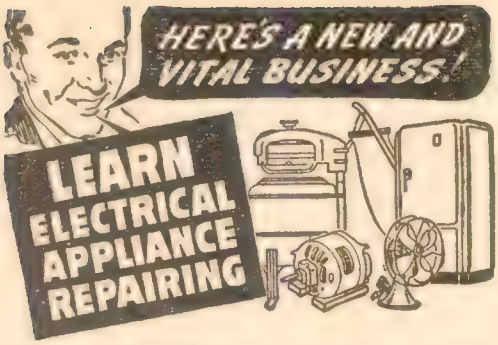

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Have been a reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and really enjoy it. I am 5 feet 4 inches tall, weigh 150 lbs., and have gray eyes and dark hair. My hobbies are dancing and movies. I promise to answer all letters that come my way.

Marie Hamilton.
203 Maple Avenue, Carrollton, Ill.

I am 17 years old, 5 feet 3½ inches tall, and weigh 114 lbs. I have dark blond hair with a red tint and blue eyes. I have lots of sports, liking hunting, skating and dancing best. My hobby is writing letters so I hope I'll get a lot and I'll try to answer all. I live on a large farm so I'm kept quite busy.

Evelyn Elaine Schulz.
R. R. 1, Box 42, Woodworth, N. Dak.

Hi, cowboy, slap some of that sour dough in your old dutch oven. I like hot cakes with my beans, too. Nothing like our old dish—cowboy strawberries. I was born and raised on the Rio Grande down in the Big Bend country west of the Pecos. Just another stray looking for better grass. Would like some pen pals and promise to try and answer any and all letters I receive at once. Am a sod widower, 6 feet tall, weigh 182 lbs. Have blue eyes, between blond and light brown hair. Don't know my exact age, between 40 and 42 or 43 years. Age limit 150 years for pals. My hobbies are registered and pedigreed hounds, hunting coon, bob cat and lions. Like good shows, dancing and needless to say good horses. Just a lonely cowpoke in a city in need of some good loyal pals so everybody who can—write.

W. T. Hardy.
701 East Santa Clara St., San Jose 12, California.

I am 33 years old, 5 feet 2 inches tall, brown hair and blue eyes, weigh 125 lbs. My favorite hobbies are view cards, stamps and hankies. As for sports, hunting and fishing and enjoy baseball games.

Vee Skinner.
c/o R. C. Merrix, Hinton, West Virginia.

I am sixteen years old, have brown hair and green eyes. My hobbies are reading, writing letters, skating and also going to basketball games. Will answer all letters received.

Ann Niemi.
Rt. 1, Box 115, Brantwood, Wisconsin.

I am 29 years old, 5 feet 8 inches tall, have brown hair and green eyes, and weigh 160 lbs. Have recently been discharged from the Army and served 3½ years overseas.

Joseph E. Collen.
Box 347, Soledad, California.

I am 27 years old. My favorite hobbies are dancing, diving, fencing, psychology, writing short stories and music. Will answer all letters and swap snapshots.

John H. Jesse.
2169 N. Argyle Ave., Hollywood 28, California.

I am 18 years old, have brown hair and brown eyes. I love to write and receive letters. My

hobbies are collecting picture post cards and scenic cushion covers. Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

Louise Kozel.
Black Hills Ordnance Depot, Igloo, South Dakota.

I am 17 years old, have red brown hair and blue eyes, 5 feet 5 inches tall, weigh 115 lbs. My favorite hobbies are bike riding, dancing, collecting songs, snapshots and writing and receiving letters.

Drusilla Adams.
Route 1, Box 189-A, North Wilkesboro, N. C.

Thanks for all of those fine letters. Shore makes us feel good to hear from so many of you—and here's a list of more BRANDING FIRE CLUB members:

Delores Olson, 337 Willard St., Jamestown, N. Y.
William Musser, Rt. 3, Benton, Pa.
Marie Carroll, 8 Belmont Avenue, Providence 8, Rhode Island.
Christine Hood, Route 1, Landersville, Ala.
Dorothy L. Shaw, Oil City, Pa.
Pauline Thomas, Route 3, Blytherville, Arkansas.
Mae Chandler, Route 1, Box 131, Stroutdale, Oregon.
Icymae Gaines, Route 1, Arley, Alabama.
Jackie Beach, Box 281, Walterboro, S. C.
Lucille B. Pokraka, R. R. 1, Holdin, Alberta, Canada.
Leo R. Lock, Lovell, Wyoming.
Gwen Hoagland, Route 2, Box 134, Roseburg, Oregon.
Theda Roark, Route 2, Box 134, Roseburg, Oregon.
Elaine Chasse, 210 N. West Avenue, Vineland, N. J.
Bernice Brookshire, 8615 Mail Avenue, Los Angeles 2, California.
Lovella Daisy Crowder, Box 546, Spruce Pine, N. C.
Marlene Walkup, Blue Sulphur Spring, W. Va.
Peggy Smith, Albany, Georgia.

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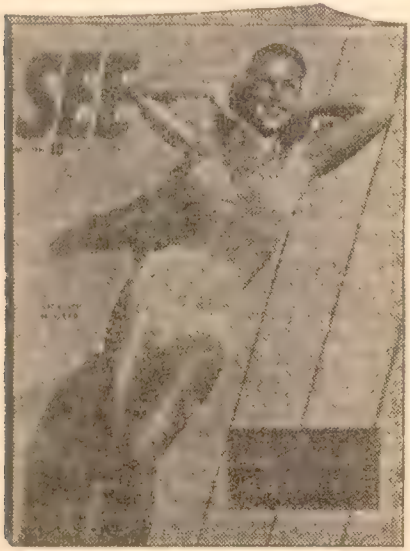

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Everybody—please address all yore letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

SEEMS like old waddies same as yores truly sometimes get to talkin' to their hosses when ridin' alone out on the range. I've heard tell of times when the hoss didn't approve of the monologue his rider was doin' and bucked that rider clear out of the saddle. Which same might be considered a form of criticism, I reckon.

Anyway I shore got the habit of talkin' to myself—even though yuh don't meet any interestin' people that way, as the feller says. But I'm sittin' at my desk mumbling to myself.

"Wonderful," I says. "Yes, sir—they shore are."

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"What?" demands a voice.

I look all around and don't see anybody. I'd seen that play about the feller who has an invisible rabbit for a friend, but far as I know there shore ain't any rabbits around the office. Just a few wolves maybe.

"I'd swear I heard somebody speak," I says, lookin' at a funny shaped black box sitting on my desk that I never noticed before. "I heard them."

"Did," said the voice. "What's wonderful, Tex?"

"Why, the grand yarns that we've got lined up for the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES," I says, and then got kind of startled. "But who's speaking?"

"Never mind," says the voice. "And don't tell me about those stories, tell the readers, I know."

Wasn't until later in the day that I learned it was the boss talkin' to me through one of them inner office little two way radio sort of things—which same was the black box on my desk.

All the same I'm going to do just like he said and get tellin' you about those mighty fine yarns in the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

First comes HER HEART RIDES HOME, a pulsating novelet by Lee Bond. Seems that Julia Milton inherited the Running M outfit from her uncle when he died. She was engaged to Larry Russel, whose dad owned the Rocking R, but the way Julia figgered Larry was right bossy. When Larry protested about Julia giving him the cold shoulder lately she told him just how she felt.

"I'm sorry, Larry, if I've seemed standoffish," Julia said. "But you know that I've been under a terrible strain. This is the third dry year in a row, and Squaw Creek is alarmingly low here on my Running M range."

"You don't see Dad and me worryin' ourselves droopy, do you?" Larry retorted.

"Why should you?" Julia countered. "Squaw Creek is a much larger and deeper stream where it crosses your Rocking R, south of my land. And you have at least a dozen good windmills down in the valley, too."

Larry admitted that the Rocking R had plenty of water, and told Julia not to worry—to forget everything and go to a dance in

[*Turn page*]

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town with him that night. But when he learned that she had been writing to Ed Grant he became angry.

Seems that Ed Grant's father had been accused of being a cattle thief ten years ago—and when his neighbors all turned against him he had left that part of the range, taking his son with him. The elder Grant had died and Julia hadn't seen Ed for ten years. All the same she still liked him a lot, deep in her heart.

Wasn't till later that Julia learned that Larry had been trying to get her to go to town right away so that she would be away from the range when Larry and his father ran a big herd of cattle onto Ed Grant's range, since Ed still owned the Bar G.

Julia's foreman told her what was happening and she headed for the Bar G. She arrived just in time to find Larry Russel and his father about to lynch Ed Grant and a man who was with the owner of the Bar G.

From then on things start happening fast, and there is plenty of action and excitement before the trouble is cleared up and Julia and Ed teach Larry a real lesson. HER HEART RIDES HOME shore is a grand yarn from start to finish!

Another swell featured novelet in the next issue is WANTED WOMAN, by Syl MacDowell.

Sheila Benton was worried as she rode into Dark Canyon. Back yonder Bud Benton, the girl's young brother, watched and waited for supplies that Sheila was bringing him loaded on an old pack horse that she led behind her own mount. Rash, hot-headed Buddy was now an outlaw.

Trouble had started on the range with the

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coming of Pete Largo and his sheep. For years, longer than either Sheila or Bud could remember, Bar XL leased the mountain range. Came Largo with five thousand woolies and some political drag that made him a rival for the forest reserve lease.

Bud Benton, just twenty, had fought with a sheep camp that inched onto Bar XL grass. He chased the herder into an icy lake, then tangled with big Pete Largo himself, licking him soundly. For this feat Bud might have been glorified among cattlemen—had it not been for the unlucky fact that the herder drowned.

Down to Pine Valley rode Pete Largo, where he swore out a warrant alleging that Bud had shot the herder. The body was unrecovered. Nobody could disprove it. So Sheriff Sam Maggart rode for the Bar XL to make the arrest.

"Easy" Jones, Pop Benton's foreman, saw the sheriff coming and gave warning. Bud took for the tall timber, one jump ahead of the law, and went into hiding. Just where only Sheila knew.

When she met her brother, Sheila learned that an old friend of theirs, Rex Kent, was coming for a visit—Bud had received the news in a letter that Sheila brought him. Since Sheila was right fond of Rex when they were younger she became mighty interested in his visit.

Then another sheepherder was killed and Bud was accused of the crime, but to save her brother Sheila insisted that she shot the man. The sheriff arrested her and took her to jail. There Rex Kent came to see her. When he learned what had happened Rex decided to go after Buddy and bring him in.

How this tense situation all works out makes WANTED WOMAN a yarn with plenty of breath-taking suspense. You'll shore enjoy every minute of it!

Another smashing romantic novelet in the next issue is ANN OF THE BAR F, by Harold F. Cruickshank.

Ann Fleming had a heart problem. She resented the fact that Tom Norman had entered into an engineering protect and was too proud to go to Tom and ask him to let her have water. Ann was determined to fight for her rights—and not until the battle was all over did she realize she should have listened to her heart and not her pretty head! ANN OF THE BAR F is a yarn with plenty of punch and emotional appeal.

There will also be a careful selection of shorter romantic stories in the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES, each one breathing the spirit of the wide open spaces and beating with the gallant hearts of the rangeland! Be seeing you all next issue!

—TEX BROWN.

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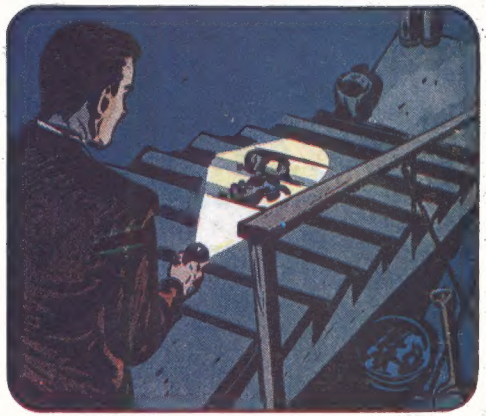

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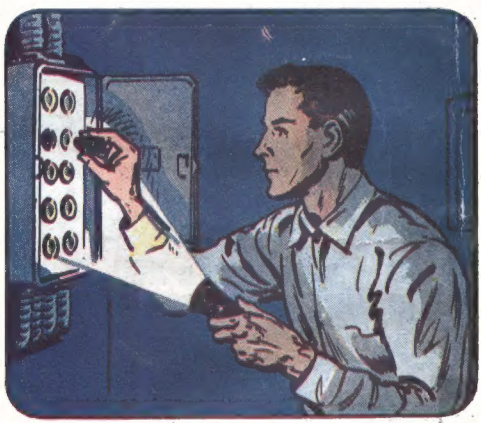

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